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# Polarisation and the news media in Europe

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# Polarisation and the news media in Europe

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A literature review of the effect of news use on polarisation across Europe

This report describes a review of the literature examining the effect of news use on polarisation across Europe. In considering work concerned with both the supply side of news (news production) and the demand side (news consumption), the report concludes that across Europe there is as yet little evidence to support the idea that increased exposure to news featuring like-minded or opposing views leads to the widespread polarisation of attitudes. However, given that only a handful of studies have addressed this issue directly, there are large gaps in our knowledge concerning the situation in different European countries.

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## Executive summary

Many people are concerned that the news media is exacerbating a polarisation of people's attitudes across Europe. This report reviews and summarises the recent available literature connecting polarisation and the news media.

The key findings that emerge from this literature are as follows:

- Across Europe there is as yet little evidence to support the idea that increased exposure to news featuring like-minded **or** opposing views leads to the widespread polarisation of attitudes. Although some studies have found that both can strengthen the attitudes of a minority who already hold strong views.
- Most studies of news use on social media have failed to find evidence of echo chambers and/or 'filter bubbles', where people are over-exposed to like-minded views. Some studies even find evidence that it increases the likelihood of exposure to opposing views.
- The extent to which people self-select news sources in Europe based on their political preferences, as well as the extent to which news outlets produce partisan coverage, still varies greatly by country.
- In addition to differences between European countries, comparative research often tends to show that the United States of America has much higher levels of partisan news production, consumption and polarisation, making it difficult to generalise from these findings.
- There are large gaps in our understanding of the relationship between the news media and polarisation, particularly outside Western and Northern Europe, and particularly concerning our knowledge of new, more partisan digital-born news sources.

## Detailed findings

To understand the links between the news media and polarisation it is essential to consider both the supply side (news production) and the demand side (news consumption). In addition to these top-level findings, a survey of the available literature also reveals a set of more detailed observations.

In this report, we break research into news production down into four categories, with the findings for each listed below. A full description of the literature related to news production can be found in Section 2.

Findings related to (i) changes in news content:

- European news coverage of issues such as immigration, elections, and corruption is influenced by the political leaning of the news outlet. But the importance of politics in shaping factors like sourcing and tone varies from country to country.
- Few studies have directly examined the degree of polarisation in news content in Europe. However research from the USA has shown that the views emphasised in the news media have become more polarised.
- An emerging body of work investigating the relationship between news content and populism has yet to find strong evidence that the news media is contributing to the rise of populist attitudes across Europe. However, one study found that newspapers over-represent populist views in Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

Findings related to (ii) the changing media landscape:

- The news media in many countries may slowly be becoming more commercialised, particularly online. But the evidence is mixed, important country differences remain, and the potential implications for polarisation are unclear.

- Commercial pressures and the move to digital are leading to profound changes to the culture, structure, and workflow of newsrooms. However, studies have not connected these developments to the production of more polarised news coverage.
- There is some evidence that national newspapers now cover a more diverse range of news topics. However, studies of local news have emphasised the implications of ownership shifts for the potential homogenisation of news content.

Findings related to (iii) the role of public service media:

- Public service media across Europe are trying to adapt to changes in audience behaviour by making news available online.
- In most cases, maximising their online reach has the potential to reduce polarised news consumption. But in order to do this they are increasingly reliant on social media and personalisation, which could plausibly increase polarisation.
- Only a small number of recent studies have analysed news content from public service media, and these studies tell us little about polarisation.

Findings related to (iv) digital-born news media:

- Many of the more established digital-born news outlets employ staff from legacy organisations, and produce coverage that is similar in important respects.
- However, they also cover issues that resonate with younger people and other groups within their target audience.
- Research into digital-born outlets has been slow to emerge, and remains lacking when it comes to what many people think of as more partisan/alternative outlets.

The literature review revealed the following findings with respect to news consumption. Research in this area can be broken down into three categories. A full description of the literature related to news consumption is contained in Section 3.

Findings related to (i) news consumption in high-choice media environments:

- Most people in Europe now consume news online, where they can easily access a wide range of different outlets.
- People in Europe access news selectively based on their interests. There is some evidence that they do this based on political ideology, but differences between those with different levels of interest in politics and the news are more important.
- The importance of political ideology for selective exposure also differs by country, with decisions more influenced by politics in the UK and Southern European countries, but less so in Western and Northern Europe.
- However, there is little evidence to support the idea that selective exposure polarises most people's attitudes – but it may strengthen the views of those who are already polarised.

Findings related to (ii) news consumption on social media:

- Social media is now a widely-used source of news for many people in Europe.
- The literature in this area finds little (if any) support for news echo chambers and filter bubbles on social media, and some studies find that people are more exposed to cross-cutting news from the opposite side of the political spectrum.
- Some prominent US studies have shown that increases in cross-cutting exposure on social media might lead to an increase in polarisation. Yet, other studies using different approaches find evidence of a depolarising effect, so the picture is far from clear – particularly in Europe.

- We know little about the impact on polarisation of other algorithmically-driven news services, like search engines and news aggregators.

Findings related to (iii) populist news consumption:

- People with populist attitudes have a lower opinion of the news media.
- Differences in news use between populists and non-populists tend to be smaller than those between left- and right-leaning people. However, in Spain and Italy differences along populist lines are significant.
- There is some early evidence that increased exposure to populist news outlets strengthens populist views among those who already have strong views, potentially leading to polarisation at the edges.

## Glossary

Automated serendipity	The process whereby algorithmic selection unexpectedly exposes people to (news) content that is not aligned with their interests and/or political views.
Cross-cutting exposure	A situation where someone is exposed to (news) content that has a different political leaning from their own.
Democratic corporatist	The name given to national media systems characterised by high newspaper circulations, strong journalistic professionalism, and high levels of state intervention in the form of press subsidies and well-funded public broadcasting.
Digital-born	An online news source that does not have a history of print or broadcast publishing, sometimes referred to by others as 'start-ups' or 'pure players'.
Echo chamber	An environment where individuals are over-exposed to news, ideas, and perspectives similar to their own, creating a false impression of how widely-held they are by the rest of the population.
Filter bubble	A state that an individual would find themselves in if they relied heavily on services that use algorithmic selection to filter out news, ideas, and perspectives that differ from their own.
Gatekeeper	An individual or organisation that decides what news will be published. Primary gatekeepers are those that perform the first round of news selection (e.g. editors and journalists that work for news organisations). Secondary gatekeepers are those that perform an additional round of selection (e.g. social networks and search engines).
Incidental exposure	A situation where someone is exposed to (news) content while they were primarily aiming to do something else.
Intermedia agenda setting	The process by which different media organisations on different platforms (e.g. print and broadcast) define each other's news agenda.
Mediatisation	The process by which the logic and imperatives of the news media come to be reflected in politics.
Media-party parallelism	A dimension of political parallelism that refers to the extent to which people with a preference for a particular political party will tend to consume news from specific news sources.
Polarised pluralist	The name given to national media systems characterised by low newspaper circulation, high levels of political parallelism, weaker journalistic professionalism, and high levels of state intervention in the form of press subsidies.
Political parallelism	The degree to which the news media mirrors the political system within a given country, for example in terms of the alignment between

	news coverage from particular outlets and general political tendencies.
Pre-selected personalisation	A situation where algorithmic selection has chosen what (news) a person will see, resulting in personalisation.
Sacerdotal	A belief that national politics and politicians should be treated with respect.
Selective exposure	A concept based on the idea that, all other things being equal, people are more likely to choose to consume (news) content that is aligned with their interests and/or political views.
Self-selected personalisation	A situation where a person has actively chosen what (news) they see, resulting in personalisation.

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## 1. Introduction

This report describes a review of the literature examining the effect of the news media on polarisation across Europe. This brief introductory section will describe the methods used to gather the relevant literature, the working definition of polarisation used throughout, and the structure of the remainder of the report.

### 1.1. Method

The findings contained within this report are based on a comprehensive review of the literature conducted by the report's authors. The authors have primarily focused on peer-reviewed research, published since 2010, examining developments in Europe. However, at various points, the authors looked outside of these constraints. Some of the most important and widely-cited recent work in this area was undertaken outside of the academy, and has therefore not undergone strict peer-review. Some foundational work in this area was published before 2010, and could not realistically be omitted. Finally, as with much contemporary communications research, work in this area is dominated by studies in the USA. Again, some of these could not be ignored and add to our broad understanding of what is happening in Europe. But, it is crucially important to also understand that many studies show that the USA is a more polarised environment than much of Europe, and insights from the USA should be applied with a degree of caution.

### 1.2. Defining polarisation

Before exploring the findings in more detail, it is worth including a brief note on how 'polarisation' is defined. Many of the studies reviewed here do not provide a working definition of polarisation, perhaps because, at the most basic level, it is a relatively well-understood concept.

Where this report uses the term, it can normally be taken to mean either: (i) a **state** where people's attitudes have diverged to ideological extremes, or (ii) the **process** by which people's attitudes are diverging to ideological extremes (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996). Both definitions focus on attitudes, but there are occasions where polarisation is a useful metaphor for describing behaviour. For example, news audiences can be thought of as polarised if people with similar ideologies converge on particular news outlets.

Some theoretical work makes a distinction between elite polarisation and polarisation of the general public. In line with the relevant empirical literature, we focus on polarisation in mass society. We also largely leave out work that has connected media use to voting patterns, as the implications for polarisation are often ambiguous. Finally, it is clear that polarisation can be a complex phenomenon involving a range of dynamics that play out differently in different contexts. However, research that connects news use and polarisation tends to adopt a simplified understanding of polarisation, so these dynamics are not considered here.

### 1.3. Structure of the report

This rest of this report is divided into the three main sections. The first of these (Section 2) focuses on how changes to news production might be affecting polarisation. Following the literature, we consider changes to news content, the shifting media landscape, the role of public service media, and digital-born news outlets.

This is followed by Section 3, where the focus shifts to news consumption. The report describes the literature on news consumption in high choice environments, news consumption on social media, and finally, populist news consumption.

The report concludes with Section 4, which contains a brief recap of the findings, a discussion of areas for future research, and some policy options.

## 2. News production

This section examines polarisation in the context of news production. It focuses on literature describing key recent shifts in the media environment and their implications for news content, news organisations, and news producers in Europe. This section is divided into four subsections: (2.1) Changes to news content, (2.2) The shifting media landscape, (2.3) The role of public service media, and (2.4) Digital-born news outlets.

Research described in this section addresses a range of news organisations, including national and international legacy media outlets, such as newspapers and television, and local and regional news organisations, reflecting both commercial and public-service funding models. It also examines an emerging body of research focused on digital-born outlets. Although some of this research considers the phenomenon of polarisation directly, polarisation is not a topic that has received much attention with regards to news production. Therefore, much of the work reviewed focuses on related concepts shaping both journalistic routines and content, such as partisanship, bias, political parallelism, political ideology, and niche interests.

### 2.1. Changes to news content

This subsection focuses on the substantial body of research evaluating how news content has changed in light of the shifts affecting legacy publishers, including adapting their production practices to new technologies, growing economic pressures, shrinking newsrooms, and changing audience consumption patterns. It focuses specifically on news about politics and public affairs, including the amount being produced, topic diversity, sourcing patterns, and coverage of specific issues. It explores characteristics of polarisation in news coverage and the relationship between media and populism.

#### Findings

- European news coverage of issues such as immigration, elections, and corruption is influenced by the political leaning of the news outlet. But the importance of politics in shaping factors like sourcing and tone varies from country to country.
- Few studies have directly examined the degree of polarisation in news content in Europe. However research from the USA has shown that the views emphasised in the news media have become more polarised.
- An emerging body of work investigating the relationship between news content and populism has yet to find strong evidence that the news media is contributing to the rise of populist attitudes across Europe. However, one study found that newspapers over-represent populist views in Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

#### 2.1.1. Characteristics of polarisation in news coverage

Research explicitly measuring polarisation in news coverage is rare among the studies reviewed, although it has been addressed in the US context, anecdotally, and in a few cases, empirically. McCluskey and Kim (2012) analysed newspaper coverage of issue groups, such as public advocacy groups, professional/trade associations, and labour unions representing various political ideologies, to identify whether 'moderatism' has remained an enduring news value (Gans, 1979). The analysis showed more evidence of polarisation than moderatism in how newspapers represented advocacy groups' ideologies. Furthermore, moderate groups were presented less prominently in articles, while polarised groups were treated more favourably. In terms of tone, moderates and liberals received more positive portrayals than conservatives.

Studies focused on Europe have assessed other elements that could be linked to polarisation, particularly how the news media covers complex political issues, and the functions of topic and source selection, framing, and tone. Several recent studies have used immigration coverage as a gauge for studying these characteristics, either within a media system or across countries. An analysis of immigration coverage in UK newspapers (Balch & Balabanova, 2011) looked at the types of sources used, finding that articles most often relied on governmental or official sources, followed by experts – particularly think-tanks and research institutes. However, while the right-wing press used think-tanks to associate danger and chaos with immigration, the left-wing press used them to debunk immigration myths.

Benson (2010) used immigration coverage in French and US elite, financial, and popular newspapers in the 1990s and 2000s to examine the concept of critical news coverage, or news critical of political and economic power. Although French media receive more state intervention in the form of press subsidies, the French press offered more criticism overall, and French outlets also engaged more with partisan politics. However, newspapers in both countries tended to levy more criticism at the party in power. State intervention can also play an important role in coverage of polarising issues, such as shaping framing choices and tonality in Swiss newspaper and magazine coverage of clean money policy and homogenising coverage across cultures and partisan leanings (Guenduez, Schedler, & Ciocan, 2016).

Studies have also assessed coverage of corruption as a polarised issue. A comparative assessment of British, French, and Italian news articles on corruption-related topics considered press-freedom levels to assess the influence of the media system (namely commercialisation and market segmentation), targeted readership, and the relationship between the news media and politics in each country (Mancini, Mazzoni, Cornia, & Marchetti, 2017). Corruption coverage was more widespread in Italy than in France and the UK. It was also more focused on local politicians, and used as a vehicle for partisan newspapers to defend political allies and attack competitors in dramatic tonal styles. Across the articles, however, each newspaper offered different representations of corruption to appeal to its particular audience, highlighting the influence of market segmentation and preventing 'the emergence of a unanimously shared sentiment of indignation' (Mancini, Mazzoni, Cornia, & Marchetti, 2017, p. 84).

Other studies have addressed the ways 'political parallelism' shapes source selection and, as a consequence, the diversity of voices and viewpoints to which readers are exposed. Political parallelism describes the degree to which the media system parallels the political system within a given country, or more specifically, the alignment between news coverage from particular outlets and general political tendencies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). A comparison of quality newspapers in the UK, Spain, and Denmark (Binderkrantz, Bonafont, & Halpin, 2017) showed that in addition to a small number of groups receiving the majority of coverage (specifically large economic groups) the types of groups emphasised differed according to the partisan leaning of the outlet, such as more coverage of business groups in Denmark's right-leaning newspaper (*Jyllands-Posten*) and public interest groups in *Politiken*.

The two main daily newspapers in Spain (*El País* and *El Mundo*) emphasised official sources, and coverage of dominant parties prevailed, particularly in times of economic crisis and during elections (Baumgartner & Bonafont, 2015). In contrast to expectations, however, both newspapers focused more attention on their enemies than their allies across all issues, suggesting that partisanship played a smaller role in determining newsworthiness. In many ways, Spain's two leading newspapers are also highly converged, covering the same topic areas, providing similar amounts of soft news, and emphasising some topics over others – trends that were consistent over the previous 15 years (Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013).

A study of newspaper coverage during the 2013 Austrian election campaign added nuance to understandings of partisanship in news by investigating the relationship between partisan bias and

news values (Haselmayer, Wagner, & Meyer, 2017). Findings suggested that rather than embracing objectivity and neutrality, and assuming media outlets report on certain actors regardless of news value, they are more likely to report newsworthy messages if they focus on an actor the outlet favours.

Different media platforms can also influence one another's coverage through a process known as 'intermedia agenda setting'. A recent study (Cushion, Kilby, Thomas, Morani, & Sambrook, 2018) used content analysis of TV news bulletins and newspaper coverage and semi-structured interviews with broadcast news leaders to examine whether broadcasters' coverage of the 2015 UK general election campaign was influenced by the news values of right- and left-wing newspapers. All interviewees denied being influenced by particular newspapers, particularly right-wing publications, but analysis of the coverage suggested that the channels presented a policy agenda more reflective of these publications, especially when stories were deemed newsworthy. The BBC, however, was least likely to follow the newspaper agenda.

### 2.1.2. News media and populism

A somewhat separate but growing body of work investigates the news media's relationship with populism. The key question here is whether the news media has promoted populist views that have thus spread to the population, or whether the news media simply reflects the existing views of politicians or the public. Studies, however, have largely relied on single case studies and anecdotal evidence, rather than robust empirical assessment (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz, Wirz, & Wirth, 2018).

Before continuing, it is worth explaining how studies in this area define populist communication. Definitions are surprisingly consistent, and 'three elements are central: (1) reference to 'the People'; (2) a battle against the 'corrupt' elite; and with a possible extension of (3) the identification of an 'out-group' (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018, p. 427). The news media in particular contexts might intentionally adopt a stance consistent with one or more of these elements, overtly spreading populist messages, or they may simply transmit the populist sentiments of others. Either way, scholars are increasingly interested in this phenomenon and its effects.

Bos and Brants (2014) conducted a longitudinal study of newspaper and television coverage of seven election campaigns in the Netherlands. Their findings suggested that political parties' own populism was higher than that in the news coverage they received. Overall, the researchers did not see a rise in populism from party leaders in political spots or in media portrayals of leaders. The results also showed that there was not a significant spread of populism to other political parties after 2006, and although right-wing parties were more associated with certain characteristics, such as an outspoken style and anti-immigration messaging, media representations of anti-establishment ideas were also associated with a populist-labelled party and adopted by some mainstream parties. In this context, populism was not a media phenomenon.

Wettstein et al. (2018) used a cross-national, comparative content analysis of tabloid, broadsheet, and weekly newspapers to examine populism-related media roles and their prevalence in 10 European countries. As the authors argue, although journalists may not actively promote populist agendas, they might contribute to 'media populism' in the ways they represent populist actors and their issues and messages, including indirectly or directly endorsing or minimising them. The roles they proposed for journalists are: gatekeepers for populist actors and their messages, interpreters who evaluate these actors' behaviours, and originators of populist messages. The coverage, which focused on labour market or immigration policies, largely under-represented populist actors on both the left and the right, although populist parties were over-represented in Italy, the Netherlands, and the UK. Further, in their interpretive role, they largely opposed populist actors, evaluating them more negatively than other politicians – actively challenging populist actors and statements at times. Therefore, on the whole, there is little evidence to support the idea that news media content is dramatically contributing to the rise of populism across Europe.

### 2.1.3. Concluding remarks

At the moment there is a lack of research into whether the news media in Europe offers coverage that could be thought of as polarised (as opposed to moderate). Following on from this, it is not clear whether some countries are home to more polarised coverage than others. Overall, although few studies have directly addressed polarisation in news content (particularly outside the USA), they have shed light on other factors shaping the form, tone, and framing of news. Some of these, particularly political parallelism, seem likely to result in more polarised coverage, but at the moment studies have stopped short of this conclusion. Research on news coverage of polarised topics is more common, but additional studies should address the relationships between journalistic attitudes, practices, and content, particularly cross-national, longitudinal, and experimental work (Albæk, van Dalen, Jebril, & de Vreese, 2014). Studies should also extend beyond political journalism to other types of information, including citizen journalism, user-generated content, and visuals (de Vreese, Esser, & Hopmann, 2017), and examine not only legacy outlets but also digital-born players and distributed news.

## 2.2. The shifting media landscape

This subsection addresses how the legacy news landscape is changing, and describes the resulting impact on news production, news producers, and news content. It focuses on longstanding concerns, including the influence of commercialisation and liberalisation across media systems. It also examines more recent phenomena, such as the need for legacy media to adapt to technological shifts and changing audience consumption patterns. These studies speak to a continually changing media landscape in which established organisations are challenged to change their editorial routines and practices to adjust to a digital-oriented media environment, while also considering how to adapt their business models to compete – not only with other online news providers, but also with large technology companies. The relevant question here is whether these changes are likely to lead to more polarised news coverage.

### Findings

- The news media in many countries may slowly be becoming more commercialised, particularly online. But the evidence is mixed, important country differences remain, and the potential implications for polarisation are unclear.
- Commercial pressures and the move to digital are leading to profound changes to the culture, structure, and workflow of newsrooms. However, studies have not connected these developments to the production of more polarised news coverage.
- There is some evidence that national newspapers now cover a more diverse range of news topics. However, studies of local news have emphasised the implications of ownership shifts for the potential homogenisation of news content.

## 2.2.1. The commercialisation of the news media

A stream of research has focused on the effects of media systems on news content, particularly the potential convergence towards a liberal model characterised by commercialisation. As applied in these studies, the concept of 'media systems' refers to ideal-type models proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), classifying countries in Europe and North America based on aspects of their political communication environments (see table 1). A situation whereby countries are increasingly characterised by the liberal model could have implications for polarisation, because it might manifest in a decline in public affairs news, a shift from news to opinion and commentary, and a rise in soft news and 'infotainment'.<sup>1</sup> But it is far from obvious what the net effect of these changes would be, given that we might reasonably expect an increase in opinion-based coverage to increase polarisation, but a rise in soft news to decrease it.

Table 1 – Three models of media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004)

	<b>Mediterranean/polarised pluralist (France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain)</b>	<b>Northern European/democratic corporatist (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland)</b>	<b>North Atlantic/liberal (UK, USA, Canada, Ireland)</b>
Newspaper industry	Low newspaper circulation; elite, politically oriented press	High newspaper circulation; early development of mass-circulation press	Medium newspaper circulation; early development of mass-circulation press
Political parallelism	High; external pluralism, commentary journalism	External pluralism, especially in national press; historically strong party press	Neutral commercial press
Professionalisation	Weaker	Strong; institutionalised, self-regulation	Strong; non-institutionalised, self-regulation
Role of the state	Strong state intervention; press subsidies in France, Italy	Strong state intervention but with press-freedom protection; press subsidies; strong public service broadcasting	Market dominated; strong public service broadcasting in United Kingdom, Ireland

Hallin and Mancini (2004) suggest that commercialisation can be defined by the decline of the party press, an increasing dominance of commercial newspapers, and the movement of newspapers from the political realm to the commercial. Commercialisation is evident in a focus on personalisation of political actors and featuring views of the 'ordinary citizen' (p. 278). An increase in media competition also leads to an environment in which political journalism is shaped by the market orientation of news organisations 'driven to base the news on what will hold costs down and keep advertisers sweet and what market research and focus groups, along with rule-of-thumb hunches

<sup>1</sup> In an empirical testing of Hallin and Mancini's models, Brüggemann et al. (2014) suggested that the liberal model did not exist in their sample, offering instead a Western type with low levels of state intervention and medium levels of press market inclusiveness and journalistic professionalism.

about human interest appeals, tell them will attract bigger audiences' (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 217).

Although research has typically found differences in the levels of commercialisation between countries, it is not completely clear that there is a general trend towards the liberal model across Europe. A cross-national study of the flow of political information in different media systems (Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010) examined whether systems with more commercialisation, including the presence of commercial television, low levels of media regulation, and a strong consumer focus, are structurally biased against news and current affairs. Focusing on news and current affairs reporting on commercial and public service broadcasters and audience figures in six countries, two representing the liberal model (the UK and the USA) and four representing the democratic corporatist model (Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden), the study found that while some evidence of convergence exists, for example in the increase of the number of channels in democratic corporatist countries, leading to more daytime news and current affairs programming (as in the liberal model), important national differences remain. In particular, European countries, including the UK, offered more peak-time and evening news, and attracted large audiences, although a shift toward softer news was evident.

A study focused on Scandinavian media (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011) also challenged suggestions of a liberal convergence. The authors found that commercialisation has been evident in profit demands and staff cutbacks in media organisations, as well as a rise in the importance of political commentary and analysis. Political commentators are featured as independent experts associated with media brands, which helps to distinguish outlets in the marketplace alongside an evident political profile. As such, the influence of the liberal system may be less of a global convergence than a process of hybridisation through which journalists in other systems adopt liberal practices or tenets, such as broadcast journalists in Italy using adversarial, watchdog interview techniques while maintaining partisan loyalties, posing more face-threatening questions to politicians from minor parties than to those with which they are associated (Gnisci, van Dalen, & Di Conza, 2014). Ultimately, Albæk et al. (2014) note that commercialisation, in some contexts, such as polarised pluralist countries, seems to have resulted in '*more partisan reporting and more political pressure*' (p. 173).

We should keep in mind that the commercialisation of media may not always suggest negative consequences. Esser et al. (2012) found that the availability of political information programming in 13 television systems increased over time, with commercial channels positively contributing, and the share of hard news greater than soft news on television and in newspapers. This may result from the fact that in Europe, programming strategies are subject to public policy as well as market forces.

Esser and Umbricht (2013) challenged suggestions that European countries are largely falling in line with what Chalaby (1996) called '*Anglo-American journalism*', particularly in terms of opinion orientation (a focus on commentary and editorialising), an embrace of objectivity, and the level of negativity. A content analysis of political affairs coverage in 18 news outlets from six national media systems over four decades showed that coverage largely fell in line with characteristics of respective media systems, such as more opinion in French and Italian newspapers and less in US newspapers, more objective reporting in US coverage and less Italy, and a stronger alignment between the UK and continental European reporting approaches than the UK and USA.

Research has also investigated whether the influence of liberalisation is more evident online. Influential newspapers in Denmark, France, and the USA featured more advertising and lighter content (e.g., weather, sports, and leisure) online, suggesting a stronger emphasis on commercialism and fewer cross-national differences (Benson, Blach-Ørsten, Powers, Willig, & Zambrano, 2012). A comparison of online newspaper coverage of the euro crisis in Germany and Spain showed political parallelism through the alignment of how media interpreted the issue (issue frames) with political ideologies, particularly shaped by participants other than party politicians, such as journalists, administrators, and scientists – although Germany showed substantially lower

parallelism (and therefore more professionalisation) than Spain (Kaiser & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2016).

On balance, many questions remain, with research – as Hallin and Mancini (2016) summarise – highlighting three possibilities: (1) Online media reflect globalised approaches that challenge national differences and reflect convergence; (2) online media reinforce existing structures and practices of media systems; and (3) online media develop differently in media systems but in a way that challenges existing patterns.

Mediatisation has also been used as a lens for understanding the changing influences on journalistic practice. The mediatisation thesis suggests that while politicians once held the power in their relationships with media, this balance has shifted, and journalists moved from a 'partisan-sacerdotal' approach to a 'non-ideological, pragmatic' one (Albæk et al., 2014, p. 174), and in the process developed their own 'media logic' (Strömbäck, 2008). Assessing this process in the digital sphere involves factors such as increased commercialisation, globalisation, and audience fragmentation. Mediatisation is also shaped by media systems and media organisations (Peruško, Čuvalo, & Vozab, 2017), in that more highly mediatised European countries – such as those with more developed digital media markets, culture production, and globalisation – also have higher journalistic autonomy, and journalists perceive economic influences to be lowest when compared to other clusters.

Elements of mediatisation that have been identified in media content include partisanship, personalisation, and detachment from policy – characteristics influenced by commercialism, technology, and professionalism (Magin, 2015). Magin's (2015) study of coverage of 36 national election campaigns in German and Austrian elite newspapers between 1949-2009 suggested that mediatisation is not a continuous process but emerges sporadically, such as increased detachment and personalisation in Austria and fluctuating personalisation in Germany, as well as an increase in partisanship. Mediatisation has been addressed through the perceptions of journalists and politicians in different media systems: Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, and Spain (Maurer & Pfetsch, 2014). Although perceptions of mediatisation of political content differed only slightly, perceptions of conflict between journalists and politicians were more pronounced in France and Spain (polarised pluralist countries), with Spanish journalists rating conflict frequently even more highly than politicians.

### 2.2.2. Convergence culture in newsrooms

For several decades, many legacy media outlets, particularly newspapers, faced little competition as information providers, drawing large audiences and revenues. The move to a digital-, mobile-, and platform-dominated media environment has irrevocably shifted this status, creating new business and editorial challenges. Studies, therefore, have considered the effects of these shifts on news organisations, journalists, and news content, often in the form of country-specific case studies, although some Europe-focused comparative work has emerged.

Interviews with executives, senior managers, and editors at 25 newspapers and commercial broadcasters in six countries (Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the UK) revealed that they were investing in various digital initiatives to reach new audiences and generate revenues (Cornia, Sehl, & Nielsen, 2016). However, with print revenues continuing to decline for newspapers and digital revenues for all outlets generally limited, the resources for digital investment came from cross-subsidies or organisational cost-cutting. Respondents also recognised the increasingly prominent role of search and social media platforms such as Google and Facebook as competition for online advertising, with some newspapers moving to pay models online, likely changing the composition of their online audiences.

Private-sector legacy media outlets have also pursued a variety of digital news projects, from premium content, to mobile apps, to e-newsletters and videos, in an effort to reach new audiences, better serve existing ones, and drive digital subscriptions (Cornia, Sehl, & Nielsen, 2017). The rise of social media has also presented opportunities and challenges for legacy outlets. Many have made significant investments in social media strategy, and have focused on driving on-site traffic through referrals, driving off-site reach through distributed content and native formats, and driving digital subscription sales, with Facebook as the key outlet (Cornia, Sehl, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018). Respondents suggested that they are aware of the 'platform risk' (p. 9) associated with focusing on one platform long-term and aim to diversify to others, such as Twitter (for reaching niche audiences and sharing breaking news) and Instagram (for reaching young audiences and building image).

A few other studies have taken a comparative approach to examining changes facing legacy media outlets, such as newsroom convergence, often in the form of interviews with, or observations of, editors. Menke et al. (2018) defined convergence as 'not just a specific way of producing and distributing news, but as a result of a cultural reconfiguration in newsrooms based on strategies facilitating or impeding their implementation' (p. 882). The authors surveyed newspaper journalists in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Spain, and Portugal, comparing their understandings of strategic approaches, editorial routines, content production, and journalistic skills and goals. The survey showed that across the countries, a print-to-online culture shift is occurring, including a focus on online and to a lesser degree mobile strategies, although the emphasis on the print product remains strong.

Beyond technological change, other structural elements also shape journalists' attitudes and, by extension, news output. A survey of journalists and analysis of their coverage in Germany, Spain, Denmark, and the UK (van Dalen, de Vreese, & Albæk, 2012) found that Spanish political journalists saw their roles as more sacerdotal (a belief that national politics and politicians should be treated with respect) and partisan, which was evident in their coverage and the higher visibility of political news and enhanced partisan tone levied toward politicians. British journalists also reflected their country's media system, taking a more entertainment-oriented approach, such as a focus on scandals, reflecting higher levels of competition and commercial influence.

A comparative content analysis (Salgado, Strömbäck, Aalberg, & Esser, 2017) considered the rise of interpretive journalism across 16 countries in newspaper, television, and online news. The authors identified key components of interpretive journalism, such as particular story types, where it appears (editorials, columns, features, interviews), explanations or interpretations in addition to factual descriptions, inclusion of analyses or speculation about consequences, and potential overt commentary. The analysis found that interpretive journalism made up 35 % of all political stories, including columns and editorials, and 29 % of all regular news stories include interpretations, although their prevalence varied across countries (more in the France and USA, less in Portugal and Spain) and platforms (it is less common on public service television news than on commercial news, and it is more common in newspapers than on public service television).

A related content analysis of the presence of political parties in news coverage during routine periods in 16 countries (Salgado et al., 2017) found limited differences between countries and outlets, and the majority of appearances of political parties were neutral or balanced. However, larger parties received more attention than smaller ones, and more popular and incumbent parties had more visibility, with professional journalistic criteria taking precedence over regulative ones (visibility connected with the voting results in the preceding election). Ultimately, the authors (de Vreese et al., 2017) concluded, 'strong public service organisations and journalists that are not tightly bound by commercial or political pressures are where the news performance is best' (p. 178).

Although many have expressed concerns that economic constraints and increasing competition can harm the quality of political news (as news organisations attempt to lure audiences), few studies have empirically assessed changes in the characteristics that determine 'quality', including a focus

on 'soft news' or horse-race political coverage (van Aelst et al., 2017). Rather, as Van Aelst et al. (2017) suggest, most major news organisations aim to provide a mixture of hard political news and entertaining soft news while also monitoring audience behaviour, so the focus of concern should instead be declining resources for journalism, potential quality differences among different types of media, and the extent of demand for this coverage.

### 2.2.3. Content homogeneity

Multiple studies have addressed concerns over a potential homogenisation of content in the context of the shift from print to online and the associated commercial pressures. Clearly, homogeneity – where different news outlets cover the same events in the same way – might have implications for polarisation, because it would limit the range of views available to news consumers. This could ultimately narrow the range of views that exist in societies, or alienate those with views that are unrepresented by the media.

Powers and Benson (2014) considered homogenisation within the same outlet, analysing diversity in genre, author, and topic areas across leading newspapers in Denmark, France, and the US. In print, French and Danish newspapers mixed genres more than US newspapers, although US newspapers followed similar patterns and provided even more diversity and cross-outlet deviation in their online editions. However, across the countries, an increase in a pluralism of topics online occurred alongside a decrease in public affairs (international and government) coverage.

Building on studies highlighting the existence of homogeneity of news stories across different media outlets (newspapers), countries, and media (print and broadcasting), Beckers et al. (2017) assessed whether the diversity of news stories covered by nine elite and popular newspapers in the Flemish region of Belgium had decreased between 1983-2013, including the influence of shifting ownership structures. In particular, although the publications' news agendas overall actually became more diverse over time, the authors found clear similarities among newspapers with the same profile (elite or popular) and less diversity among newspapers belonging to the same owner.

Many local news organisations have experienced increasing ownership consolidation, leading to different types of strategies for producing and monetising news, such as a search for national scale via centralised content creation and a focus on online traffic and advertising (namely in the UK), a focus on regional breadth through centralised national content creation and paid content models, and local depth, in which editorial and advertising strategies are driven by the local community or region increasingly in the form of paid models (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018).

Sjøvaag (2014) investigated homogenisation in the regional newspaper market in Norway, a climate where regulation of media ownership is based on ideals of pluralism and diversity, and efforts to maintain news media's presence in local communities. Sjøvaag analysed content in four newspapers published in medium-to-large cities and serving regional areas, all with the same corporate owner (Schibsted) and having experienced newsroom cuts, the loss of regional offices, fewer editorial resources, and efforts to shift business models from print to online. As a result, news coverage moved closer to the location of editorial offices, evident in an increase in local or city-oriented content (at the expense of regional and national content) as well as a focus on softer news (lifestyle, consumer, sports, traffic) at all levels.

Firmstone (2016) explored notions of a UK local news crisis, investigating the ways local news media fulfil four normative democratic roles: informational, representative, watchdog, and campaigning. Using interviews with journalists and other actors (council communicators) in Leeds, UK, to assess the democratic value of local news and challenges to achieving it, Firmstone found that interviewees perceived that news media fulfilled less of its information role than in the past because of changes in audience demands. Some also perceived that local news had become more sensational to grab audience attention, and may not provide enough information for citizens to

understand and engage with complex local issues, exacerbated by a lack of resources to pursue investigative journalism (a watchdog role). Even so, respondents suggested that local media represented the views of the public well, which was enhanced by their use of social media to connect with and represent the concerns of audiences.

#### 2.2.4. Concluding remarks

This literature chronicles the challenges of legacy outlets producing online news, shifting to digitally focused business models, and attempting to meet the changing consumption habits of consumers. Although polarisation is rarely addressed directly within this body of work, studies have addressed potential homogenisation associated with the movement to online news and the implications of increasing ownership consolidation on content. In particular, studies have assessed the influence of media systems and the role of commercialisation and mediatisation. Scholars have used single-country and comparative designs, both of offline and online content, but more work is needed to determine whether converged, differentiated, or hybrid approaches take precedence online (Hallin & Mancini, 2016). This research should consider both structural differences in media systems (Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, & Humprecht, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2016) and the ways journalists and news organisations adapt to new technologies to remain competitive in media markets.

### 2.3. The role of public service media

This subsection summarises studies on public service media and how these organisations are responding to broader shifts in the media environment – namely the influence of digitalisation and media convergence in newsrooms. It examines studies focused on the production of public service media in the digital environment, including research using interviews with managers, editors, and reporters about how their organisations view and respond to these shifts in terms of their production and editorial strategies, and studies evaluating the impact of these approaches on the nature of the content public service media produce, including comparisons with commercial outlets and social media.

When considering aspects of polarisation in the context of public service media, it is important to recognise that different countries feature different political information environments in terms of 'the quantitative supply of news and public affairs content provided to a national audience by routinely available sources' (Esser et al., 2012, p. 250). These environments, in which television plays a key role, are often shaped by linguistic differences, culture, normative expectations about the role of the media, and state regulations (Esser et al., 2012). Media policy decisions and market forces are also important influences on the size and shape of political information environments.

#### Findings

- Public service media across Europe are trying to adapt to changes in audience behaviour by making news available online.
- In most cases, maximising their online reach has the potential to reduce polarised news consumption. But in order to do this they are increasingly reliant on social media and personalisation, which could plausibly increase polarisation.
- Only a small number of recent studies have analysed news content from public service media, and these studies tell us little about polarisation.

#### 2.3.1. From public service broadcasters to public service media

Public service media have long held strong positions in countries around Europe, providing a large share of broadcasting content and reaching many in the population through television and radio. But online, their reach has been more limited, as they compete with other legacy media, digital-born

outlets, and platform companies for audience share (Sehl, Cornia, & Nielsen, 2017). The expansion of public service broadcasters online 'was all but self-evident, in part due to the fact that the Internet has become a global communication system that is fairly impervious to national regulation' (van Dijck & Poell, 2015, p. 151), although expansion in places like the Netherlands was limited by legal constraints on unfair competition, quickly followed by the need to move into social media spaces, with many public service outlet staff as early adopters.

In this environment, senior managers and editors at public service outlets in six European countries identified several key challenges, including providing news for the broad public while reaching younger audiences, moving from desktop-oriented strategies to developing offerings for mobile devices, and effectively using platforms such as social media, search engines, video hosting, and messaging apps (Sehl, Cornia, & Nielsen, 2016). To remain effective in producing news in the digital environment, public service media leaders have suggested a focus on strong and public support from senior leaders, support from the newsroom, cross-functional teams to create projects, and an audience-focused approach (Sehl et al., 2017).

### 2.3.2. Public service media and personalisation

Public service media can potentially reduce polarisation by attracting large, mixed audiences. As a result, the functions social media and personalisation play in these organisations raise important questions. In the case of social media, senior editors and managers for news and social media at public service media in six countries identified differences in their strategic priorities, remit, and organisational goals and those of commercial platform companies, although they recognised the value of social media in increasing their reach (Sehl, Cornia, & Nielsen, 2018). Although many have reduced the number of social media accounts they oversee in order to maximise resources and better serve users, they also suggested key aims for social media news distribution: website referrals, reaching young people and difficult-to-reach audiences, and enhancing participation. They also use analytics but focus on tactical goals, such as optimising postings, rather than for directing editorial priorities.

Andersson Schwarz (2016) used Scandinavian public service media and their adaption to digital media, including personalisation (audience targeting), social media usage, the transnationalisation of media flows, audience pluralisation, and individualised consumption, as a model for understanding how national broadcasters around the world are responding to these shifts. In particular, public service media are grappling with the need to move to online platforms that were not designed for public broadcasting, leading to questions about whether adapting to a platform logic still enables them to reach majority audiences or whether minority interests take precedence. Interviews with executives in the Swedish national radio and television broadcaster suggested that they want to better understand their audiences and their preferences but in ways that diverge from commercial media, such as providing greater value and allowing them to discover unexpected stories, and they continue to aim to draw mass appeal while accurately representing minority groups and their concerns. They also recognise that algorithmic prediction is risky in offering minority programming and can be intrusive. Therefore, respondents focused on providing 'majoritarian programming with minoritarian elements' to remain diverse and legitimate while pursuing 'benevolent datafication' (p. 137).

Van den Bulck and Moe (2018) also assessed public service media's relationship with personalisation, including how they legitimise their strategies and how personalisation affects their core values (e.g. universality), mapping the strategies of public service media around Europe and using organisations from Norway and the Flemish region of Belgium as case studies. They found that most public service media strategies had moved to digital and algorithmic personalisation, several to an intense level, and they saw it as a way to achieve universality through different techniques (introducing users to new information, bringing users together). Norwegian public broadcaster NRK, for example, saw issues such as filter bubbles and privacy as minor issues. A minority saw personalisation as a

marketing tool, and some were not yet involved with it, such as the broadcaster from the Flemish region of Belgium, VRT, which saw filter bubbles and privacy as obstacles to ensuring universality.

### 2.3.3. Public service media content

Research has also considered changes in public service media's news in the online environment, both on their websites and social media platforms. However, it is difficult to see what the implications are for polarisation. A large-scale content analysis of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's online news (Sjøvaag, Moe, & Stavelin, 2012) suggested that the organisation had not significantly incorporated online publishing approaches such as multimedia content/video, engagement tools, and linking into its news production, although its website suggested an adaption to norms of online news through focusing on a national news agenda and crime, culture, and entertainment coverage, as well as emphasising local news. A follow-up study (Sjøvaag, Stavelin, & Moe, 2016) found that the website's profile had not changed significantly, with similar distribution of content categories on the front page and similar distribution of foreign and national content, although editors also moved up stories on culture, science, and politics after initial publication. Although video use and linking had increased, facilitating user comments declined in favour of social media sharing, reflecting commercial approaches.

Analyses of public service media's social media content have also emerged. For example, Steiner, Magin and Stark (2018) compared the diversity of news published on outlets' main Facebook sites with the diversity of commercial news on Facebook and public service news on television. Issue diversity was lower for public service news on Facebook than commercial news, as public service media continue to focus more heavily on politics, and overall, commercial providers outperformed them in diversity on television and on Facebook. However, public service news was more diverse on Facebook, suggesting that public service media are pursuing their universality mission on other platforms.

### 2.3.4. Concluding remarks

Research on public service media has investigated the ways these organisations are adapting to the online environment, highlighting the tensions inherent in adopting digital strategies, namely personalisation tools, and maintaining efforts to reach a universal audience. Although research has emphasised how these questions play out in public service media newsrooms, additional work should comparatively and longitudinally address the effects of these shifts on the diversity of content (topics, sourcing) on multiple types of platforms, including television, radio, online, and social media. Although public service media are likely to have an influence on how polarisation develops in many European countries, the potential impact of these changes on polarisation has yet to be explored.

## 2.4. Digital-born news outlets

This final subsection on news production addresses the small but growing body of research investigating the role of new digital-born players in the media landscape and the factors leading to their emergence. This section considers studies focused on influential and popular national and international news outlets, such as BuzzFeed, Vice, and the Huffington Post, as well as the rise of hyperlocal news outlets. It also includes studies focused on the content these outlets produce, such as comparisons of how digital-born and legacy media cover particular topics.

### Findings

- Many of the more established digital-born news outlets employ staff from legacy organisations, and produce coverage that is similar in important respects.

- However, they also cover issues that resonate with younger people and other groups within their target audience.
- Research into digital-born outlets has been slow to emerge, and still lacking when it comes to what many people think of as more partisan/alternative outlets.

### 2.4.1. The culture of digital-born news outlets

A 2012 study of the emergence of journalistic online start-ups in Western Europe (Bruno & Nielsen, 2012) focused on a particular subset of digital-born media: those that are journalistic (focused on news and current affairs and producing content audiences recognise as journalism), online (built around their web presence as well as offering social and mobile versions), and start-ups (not affiliates or spin-offs of legacy media). Examining nine examples from three countries (Germany, France, and Italy), the authors found that despite lower barriers to entry into news and access to digital publishing tools, they face economic situations as challenging as for legacy media. They also face some unique challenges, such as competing with more established brands. The most successful start-ups in each country, such as France's *Mediapart* and Germany's *Perlentaucher*, were those that had identified niche audiences – typically people highly interested in news or those seeking out specialist knowledge.

A more recent report (Nicholls, Shabbir, & Nielsen, 2016) found in a study of 12 digital-born news outlets in four countries (France, Germany, Spain, and the UK) that these organisations tended to be launched by journalists (often those with a legacy media background) and emphasised journalistic ideals, such as producing quality work or having social impact, over a focus on innovation or revenues. They were also more prominent in countries with weaker legacy news media, such as Spain and France, although they had smaller reach and fewer resources. They also used similar approaches to legacy media, such as video, native advertising, and pay models, and faced similar challenges in terms of the influence of search and social platforms. Editorially, rather than matching legacy media in terms of content diversity, they focused on particular niches and content approaches (e.g., investigative journalism).

These considerations have largely persisted (Nicholls, Shabbir, & Nielsen, 2017), while many international outlets also pursue global strategies focused on growing audiences and eventually advertising revenues, beginning in the USA and moving to other high-income democracies. This practice creates a new set of pressures, such as whether to pursue localised national editions or a more uniform approach. A comparative study of online news start-ups in Toulouse, France, and Seattle, USA (Powers & Zambrano, 2016), found that professional experience was more valuable than business or technical skills, in that founders could convert their capital (education, journalism experience, access to local networks) into the resources they needed while also using it to produce journalism.

Digital-born outlets do differ in some ways from legacy outlets, however. Start-ups BuzzFeed and Vice contrast with legacy media through employing young editorial staffs, blended with high-profile hires from legacy outlets, and targeting young audiences through various platforms, diverse news content, and distinctive editorial voices (Stringer, 2018). These outlets covered traditional beats, such as politics, health, crime, business, and technology, as well as subjects that would resonate with their audiences, such as gender, civil rights, LGBT issues, and mental health.

### 2.4.2. Hyperlocal news outlets

To address local-news gaps, hyperlocal news sites, defined as locally based, community-oriented, online based news filling a news gap and encouraging civic engagement (Metzgar, Kurpius, & Rowley, 2011), have emerged around Europe. A study of UK hyperlocals considered their sources, topics, 'localness,' and civic value (Williams, Harte, & Turner, 2015). Content largely focused on local community activities, local councils and their services, and politics, with sourcing emphasising a

high level of consensus. That is, 'in terms of the level of debate and the amounts of alternative viewpoints presented on any given story, this journalism, on the evidence of this content sample, seems quite uncritical' (p. 691). This spurred from hyperlocal news producers' interest in portraying their communities positively, and they defined their practices against the routines of mainstream news providers, citing intrusion, distant coverage, an over-reliance on press releases, and sensationalism and negativity.

In a survey of the hyperlocal market in Sweden, where the dominance of media conglomerates has resulted in content centralisation, the closure of editorial offices, and fewer in-house journalists, Leckner, Tenor, and Nygren (2017) found hyperlocal media in the form of subscription and free newspapers, community radio and TV, and local websites. The outlets largely said they were driven by supporting the community and strengthening local identity over economic goals. Many cited the value of addressing gaps in quality legacy news coverage, offering complementary voices, and pushing legacy media to improve.

#### 2.4.3. Digital-born news content

Research into the culture and practices of digital-born news outlets is growing, but we know little about their coverage, and whether it differs from that produced by legacy outlets. In one of few studies comparing the content of legacy and digital-born media, Painter, Kristiansen, and Schäfer (2018) considered differences in reporting on climate change, specifically the 2015 Conference of the Parties summit in Paris, from legacy media in five countries (France, Germany, Spain, the UK, and the USA) and three digital-born outlets, BuzzFeed, Huffington Post, and Vice. There was much overlap in the coverage, but also some important differences. The Huffington Post provided a larger volume of coverage than BuzzFeed and Vice while reflecting similar editorial priorities as legacy media, although it showed a lower presence of the 'uncertainty' theme. This mirrors left-leaning outlets' lower emphasis on climate-change sceptics. Also, Vice pursued different themes to the other outlets, such as providing more coverage of the civil society protests outside the negotiations.

#### 2.4.4. Partisan/alternative digital-born news outlets

The problem concerning our lack of understanding about how content from digital-born outlets differs becomes more acute if we acknowledge that recent years have seen the emergence of multiple alternative, populist, and partisan websites around Europe (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018). These sites, which include the right-wing outlet Breitbart in the USA (also operating in some European countries), the left-wing outlet The Canary in the UK, the right-wing outlet Politically Incorrect in Germany, and others, tend to have a particular political or ideological focus in an attempt to reach audiences sharing this perspective. These sites, however, also speak to divisions beyond the left-right dichotomy, with examples on both sides emphasising anti-establishment or anti-immigration messaging. The sites' users tend to demonstrate low trust in news, particularly mainstream outlets, compared to total user samples in their countries (Newman et al., 2018). These outlets are often assumed to have an impact upon polarisation, but without proper analysis of their content it is difficult to assess this.

#### 2.4.5. Concluding remarks

Research on digital-born outlets is limited but growing, reflecting the recognisability and potential influence of these outlets on the broader media ecosystem. Although studies have not addressed these outlets in the context of polarisation, their emphasis on reflecting niche topics to appeal to niche audiences has been explored. Additional work is needed to examine the influence of digital-born media on legacy outlets in terms of production, editorial, and commercial strategies as well as additional comparisons of their content in different topic areas and editorial approaches. With respect to polarisation, it will be crucial for future research to examine a new set of digital-born sites that many think of as partisan/alternative.

### 3. News consumption

This section shifts the focus from the literature on news production to news consumption. It is divided into three subsections: (3.1) News consumption in high choice environments; (3.2) News consumption on social media; and (3.3) Populist news consumption.

Research described in this section focuses on news consumption that takes place in the contemporary news environment. As such it refers to newspaper and television consumption, but – guided by the literature – there is a particular focus on online news use, and within that, news consumption on social media. In contrast to the work on news production from the previous section, the issue of polarisation is approached much more directly in this work. Research investigating related concepts is generally easier to link to polarisation, so as a whole there are fewer gaps. However, it is noticeable that many of the most prominent studies were conducted in the USA, and it is highly questionable whether the findings can be directly applied to Europe. To a certain extent the technological infrastructure of the web, and the services provided by technology platforms, are the same in the USA as they are in Europe. But at the same time, news audience behaviour can differ greatly between countries with similar levels of economic and technological development (Newman et al., 2018) due to the political and cultural differences emphasised by media system theory (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

#### 3.1. News consumption in high-choice environments

This subsection describes the recent literature on news consumption in modern, high-choice media environments. Polarisation resulting from exposure to news media is a longstanding concern that predates the expansion of media choice. However, the growth in choice has exacerbated fears that people will be more easily able to self-select news and information that will ultimately strengthen their attitudes, meaning that they diverge within the population as a whole. This section starts by mapping the extent of online news consumption in Europe, before exploring the extent to which people select news based on their preferences, how this varies from country-to-country, and how this process affects people's attitudes.

##### Findings

- Most people in Europe now consume news online, where they can easily access a wide range of different outlets.
- People in Europe access news selectively based on their interests. There is some evidence that they do this based on political ideology, but differences between those with different levels of interest in politics and the news are more important.
- The importance of political ideology for selective exposure also differs by country, with decisions more influenced by politics in the UK and southern European countries, but less so in Western and Northern Europe.
- However, there is little evidence to support the idea that selective exposure polarises most people's attitudes – but it may strengthen the views of those who are already polarised.

##### 3.1.1. The growth of online news use

The expansion in media choice began with the emergence of cable television, and exploded with widespread access to the web. In contrast to the media environments that preceded it, the one that most people in Europe now experience contains a huge number of news sources to choose from, with the 'costs' (Downs, 1957) associated with accessing that information – understood in terms of time and effort, as well as money – lower than ever.

According to Eurostat, a majority of people in almost every European country use the internet to access news. Data from 2017 shows that 61 % of all people living within the European Union access news online, with the figure rising to 72 % among those that have accessed the internet in the last three months for any purpose. The proportion of people who use the internet to access news tends to be higher in the Nordic countries, where figures are normally over 80 %, and in Western Europe, where they are typically above two-thirds. In these countries, the internet now rivals television as the most widely-used news source, with both considerably more popular than print (Newman et al., 2018). In parts of Eastern and Southern Europe the figures are lower, dropping below 50 % in Bulgaria, Turkey, Romania, and Italy. Here, television news still dominates, but the popularity of online news is growing as more and more people are connected to the internet.

It is important to recognise, however, that although the reach of online news tend to be high, news only accounts for a very small part of what people do online. The expansion in media choice enabled by the web means that people can choose to spend their time online doing many other things, and for some people, other activities can be far more appealing than reading the news. As will be discussed later, greater media choice means that the least interested and least motivated may opt out of news altogether, creating gaps between news users and news avoiders. On top of this, research suggests that even among those who do access news online, the amount of time people actually devote to it is decreasing (Thurman & Fletcher, 2017) due to differences in online and offline reading habits (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2014).

Those that consume news online now have a huge number of sources to choose from. People can easily access a wide range of legacy news brands that offer their content online, including sources from outside of their geographic region, and often at no additional cost. Furthermore, they can now access digital-born sources of news that do not have a print or broadcasting legacy. However, it should be noted that the most popular and most trusted online news sources in most countries are still newspaper and broadcaster brands, even as some – such as HuffPost and BuzzFeed – have achieved widespread popularity, particularly in the English-speaking world (Newman et al., 2018).

A key concern related to polarisation is that many people think that some new digital-born news sources are considerably more partisan than those that were available in the twentieth century. As was described in Section 2.4, we currently lack research into these sources, particularly with respect to whether they are actually produce more partisan or polarising coverage than mainstream sources. However, data from the 2018 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2018) reveals that most of the online news sources that experts have identified as being partisan and/or alternative are not very widely used. For example, in the UK outlets such as Breitbart, The Canary, Westmonster, Another Angry Voice, and Evolve Politics were each used by no more than 2 % of the online population, and fewer than 20 % had even heard of them. Figures were slightly higher for broadly similar sites in Sweden and Spain (and in the USA), but they still reach far fewer people than the most prominent online news sources. Clearly then, we should not expect these sources to have a large direct impact upon attitude polarisation among the population at large. However, they may play an outsized role in shaping elite discourse.

### 3.1.2. Selective exposure

A key foundational concept for thinking about polarisation is 'selective exposure'. The idea here is that, given the choice, people are more likely to self-select news media that are aligned with their interests and/or political views. As a concept, selective exposure dates back to the dawn of the field of communication science (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944), but there has been a renewed interest in recent years due to the expansion in media choice outlined in the previous subsection. Scholars have asked whether selective exposure becomes more likely in media environments where people have more and more sources to choose from, and the costs – again understood in terms of time and effort, as well as money – are generally lower. One reason scholars are interested in selective exposure is because of their belief that this will have some bearing on polarisation. For

example, selective exposure (particularly to more partisan news sources) might allow people to become more familiar with arguments that support their views, and thus develop a stronger or more entrenched position (Gvirsman, 2014).

A number of prominent studies from the USA have found evidence that people engage in selective exposure. Particularly so when it comes to cable television news, where the USA is home to a number of prominent partisan news channels (see e.g., Stroud, 2011). There is also evidence that selective exposure is a factor when it comes to online news consumption. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) used an online experiment to show that Republicans were more likely to click on a news story if it was placed next to a Fox News logo, and less likely if it was instead associated with CNN or NPR. Democrats reacted in the opposite way. If this behaviour holds for the rest of the population, the result would likely be news audiences polarised along political lines.

It is important to keep in mind that even if a person engages in selective exposure, it does not mean that they will never be exposed to cross-cutting news – defined as news aligned with an opposing set of views. People can make selection decisions based on a wide range of factors (e.g. a preference for a particular medium), which means that they might still encounter many different kinds of news coverage. Furthermore, a preference for certain sources does not necessarily mean that people also avoid opinion challenges (Garrett, 2009). As such, we cannot assume that the existence of selective exposure means that highly fragmented news audiences will emerge (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012).

The studies mentioned so far in this section have mainly focused on 'partisan' selective exposure, because choices are driven by political preferences. However, selective exposure – and to a certain extent polarisation – does not have to be understood in terms of politics. Prior (2007) has repeatedly emphasised the importance of political interest (or lack of) and entertainment preferences in understanding why some people opt out of news consumption and turn their attention to other activities. He argues that this has been important for understanding developments in the USA, because it can be used to explain why voting behaviour appears more polarised even if attitudes change little. If people are able to opt out of news, they know less about current affairs, and become less likely to vote. This means that the voting population becomes more concentrated with partisans, creating the impression that the population as a whole is more polarised (Prior, 2013).

Studies of selective exposure in Europe are far less common. There is a sense in which studies of partisan selective exposure in particular are naturally suited to the US context, because it is generally considered to be home to a high number of partisan news sources, and the population can be more easily segmented due to the two-party system. However, as is clear from the work on media systems described in Section 2.2, the USA differs from most European countries in terms of history, economics, and politics. In particular, most European countries have what scholars call different 'opportunity structures' (Esser et al., 2012), referring to differences in the availability and ease-of-access to news of different types, meaning that the findings from the USA cannot necessarily be generalised.

Skovsgaard, Shehata, and Strömbäck (2016) used a four-wave panel survey of exposure to televised party leader interviews ahead of the 2010 Swedish elections to compare the influence of political ideology and interest in politics. The results showed that although political ideology mattered – with, for example, left-leaning respondents more likely to watch a left-leaning party leader interview – political interest was a more important factor for understanding whether an individual tuned in or not. This suggests that in countries like Sweden, because there tends to be more media choice at the genre level (e.g. news, entertainment, sport, etc.) than at the political level, the news media plays a comparatively small role in political polarisation. Although, of course, if the mechanisms identified by Prior (2013) are applicable to Europe, polarised voting behaviour could still result.

This is just one study of one European country, but there is some evidence that these findings are generalisable to other parts of the region. Castro-Herrero, Nir, and Skovsgaard (2018) analysed data for 27 EU countries from the 2009 European Election Study to show that in countries with popular public service broadcasting, the influence of political interest in determining an individual's level of cross-cutting news exposure is lower. To be clear, partisanship and interest in politics still create some degree of selective exposure, but stronger public broadcasters act as a bridge because they tend to show more news at primetime. Again, this suggests that the news media plays a smaller role in the polarisation process in Europe.

### 3.1.3. Political parallelism

Another stream of research has used the concept of 'political parallelism' in order to better understand patterns of media use across different countries, particularly in Europe. Political parallelism is a key part of media system theory, and describes the degree to which the media system parallels the political system within a given country, or more specifically, the alignment between news coverage from particular outlets and general political tendencies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Political parallelism can manifest itself in numerous ways, but with respect to news consumption and polarisation, 'media-party parallelism' (how audiences with distinct political ideologies tend to gravitate towards particular news outlets) is perhaps the most relevant (Hallin & Mancini, 2016). Clearly this overlaps with partisan selective exposure, but political parallelism tends to be used to understand differences at the national level, rather than differences between individuals.

The implications of political parallelism for polarisation are clear. If a media system contains a high degree of parallelism, news audience polarisation will be high, but if most news audiences for specific outlets are mixed, then news audience polarisation will be low. Of course, news audience polarisation is not the same as attitude polarisation (which we will discuss later in this section), but it is relevant for an understanding of the underlying mechanisms.

A handful of studies have measured political parallelism (or, more specifically, media-party parallelism) across European countries. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) three media system ideal types (democratic corporatist, polarised pluralist, and liberal) were in part based on political parallelism. As described in Section 2.2, countries in the polarised pluralist model (e.g. Italy and Spain) are expected to exhibit high degrees of political parallelism because news outlets tend to be strongly partisan. Democratic corporatist countries (e.g. Germany and the Nordics) are marked by low levels of political parallelism due to the prevalence of consensus politics and low levels of media partisanship. Countries included in the liberal model (e.g. Ireland, the UK, and the USA) were traditionally associated with high commercialisation leading to lower levels of partisanship. But the partisanship of the press in the UK, and increasingly television in the USA, means that countries in the liberal model are less consistent in terms of political parallelism (Nechushtai, 2018).

Nonetheless, subsequent work on political parallelism has been largely in line with Hallin and Mancini's original framework (e.g. Brüggemann et al., 2014). With respect to media-party parallelism in particular, van Kempen (2007) used data from the 1999 European Election Study in 15 countries to measure the extent to which using specific news outlets was associated with voting for particular political parties. The analysis showed that media-party parallelism varied considerably across Europe, and as expected, the measures were particularly high in countries like Italy and Spain, and much lower in Germany, Ireland, and Finland.

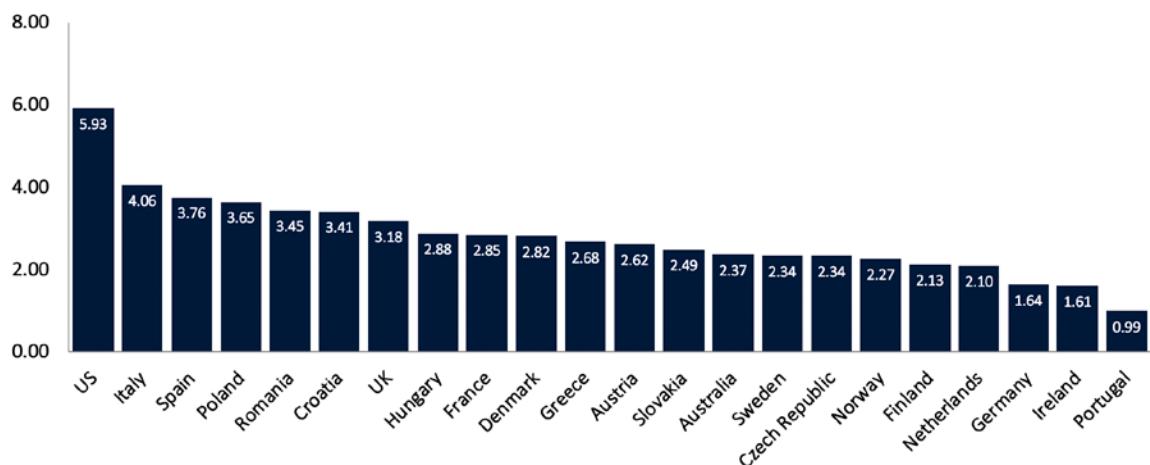
Similarly, Goldman and Mutz (2011) also used survey data collected in the 1990s from 11 countries (those in Europe were Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the UK) to highlight differences in exposure from newspaper and television use in different countries. By combining measures of media use, media perceptions, and vote choice, the researchers were able to estimate the extent to which people thought their most-used newspapers and television news programmes contained

partisan views aligned with their own beliefs. In most countries people felt that their preferred newspaper contained partisan views aligned with their own beliefs, but when it came to television news the picture was far more mixed, with people in some countries using television news that they thought expressed views different from their own. In other words, in most countries the level of cross-cutting exposure people experience from newspapers is lower than from TV news. The researchers also found that in countries where political parallelism is more prevalent, such as in Greece and Italy, and Bulgaria and the UK in the case of the press, then cross-cutting news exposure is lower simply because it's easier for people to select media that match their views.

Work on political parallelism clearly shows that there are large differences between European countries. However, most studies are based on data collected at a time before online news consumption was widespread, raising the question of whether online news used changed patterns of media-party parallelism, and whether the introduction of more partisan digital-born media sources changes patterns of news consumption.

As part of the 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017), the authors described an approach to measuring news audience polarisation similar to those used to measure media-party parallelism. The measure builds on the 'audience-based' approach pioneered by Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011), in that it is based on the degree to which news outlets contain left- and/or right-leaning individuals. Online survey respondents across 22 countries were asked which online news outlets they used in the previous week, as well as where they would place themselves on a seven-point scale ranging from 'very left wing' to 'very right wing'. This data was then used to compute the average political leaning of the population as well as the average political leaning of the audience for each news outlet, with the difference between the two producing a political leaning score indicating the partisanship of its audience. The standard deviation of the scores for each outlet (weighted by audience size) within a country then gave an indication of how polarised its online news audiences are. The extent to which different countries contain polarised news audiences is displayed in figure 1.

Figure 1 – Level of online news audience polarisation in each country



Source: Newman et al., 2017

The ranked order of the countries in figure 1 is broadly in line with Hallin and Mancini's typology, in that polarised pluralist countries tend to have higher levels of news audience polarisation, and democratic corporatist countries have lower levels. These patterns therefore differ little from those found offline in the 1990s, suggesting that online news consumption is shaped by similar forces as was offline news consumption at the end of the twentieth century. Finally, it is clear that news audience polarisation is much higher in the USA than in any of the other European countries

considered. Again, this cautions us against generalising too strongly from US studies, but also suggests that the effect of the news media on polarisation might be smaller in Europe.

### 3.1.4. Attitude polarisation

It is important to keep in mind that even if we can observe political parallelism and selective exposure, and the polarisation of news audience that results, it does not necessarily mean that people's attitudes have also become more polarised. Prior (2013) has shown that changes in attitudes are not a necessary condition for more polarised voting behaviour, so it is useful to consider studies that attempt to directly link media use to changes in attitudes.

Results from experiments conducted in the USA find only limited support for the idea that partisan selective exposure leads to more polarising attitudes. In an experiment where people were forced to watch cable television excerpts, Arceneaux et al. (2013) found 'little evidence that watching pro-attitudinal shows can lead individuals to become more resistant to opposing arguments' (p. 227). It was only for the relatively small number of people who have a high need for cognition (those who enjoy learning arguments and deliberative reasoning) that forced exposure to news from outlets ideologically aligned with the participant strengthened their views on taxation. Furthermore, the effects were smaller if the experiment was made more realistic and participants were allowed to select what they watched, rather than being assigned. Levendusky (2013) also used experiments to reach similar conclusions, in that the effects of exposure to partisan television news were stronger among those who are most engaged and adopt extreme positions. This may ultimately mean that US cable television may be fostering polarisation among elites, but evidence for the impact on the public at large is weak.

It should be noted that one US study in particular has produced findings for online news use that point in a different direction. Tewksbury and Riles (2015) analysed three waves of American National Election Survey data and showed that as people's online news use increased over time, the attitudes of Democrats and Republicans towards most issues tended to diverge. However, the methods used in this study make it difficult to be sure of a causal link between news use and polarisation.

Studies of the effect of news use on attitude polarisation from Europe are sorely lacking. In an exception, Trilling et al. (2017) used a quasi-experiment with participants in the Netherlands to test whether people's attitudes towards immigration changed after being exposed to different news articles. Participants were exposed to either a positive or negative article on immigration under experimental conditions, and asked about their attitudes towards immigration before and after. Similar to earlier studies from the USA, some participants were assigned articles, whereas others were allowed to choose for themselves. In line with ideas about selective exposure, those offered a choice tended to select the article that aligned with their views. They also found that people who were exposed to the positive article expressed more positive attitudes towards immigration, but those that were exposed to the negative article displayed no change in attitude. These effects were the same regardless of whether people already agreed with the tone of the article. In other words, and in contrast to studies from the USA, 'selective exposure occurs, but does not necessarily lead to polarisation' (p. 206). The authors concluded by suggesting that one of the reasons why the effects might not be the same in the Netherlands is that it is generally considered to be a less polarised environment, with people less used to coming into contact with partisan news.

### 3.1.5. Concluding remarks

A number of studies have found evidence for selective exposure in both the USA and in Europe. However, in Europe, selective exposure appears to be less driven by partisan politics, and more influenced by general levels of interest in politics and the news. And even the gaps in news exposure that do exist can be bridged by public service media. Experimental studies have generally not found a strong connection between selective exposure and changes in attitudes that might lead to

polarisation among the mass public, but studies of this kind are scarce in Europe, and we do not have a good understanding of how this mechanism might work in many European countries. Furthermore, due to limitations in experimental designs, it is difficult to know what the long term effect of selective exposure on polarisation might be, and for the time being we should remain open to the possibility that there could be a steady polarising effect over time – particularly if some of the more partisan digital-born sources grow in popularity.

## 3.2. News consumption on social media

This subsection reviews the literature related to news use on social media, and the effect this has on polarisation. With respect to polarisation, the worldwide growth of social media has shifted the focus away from selective exposure, political parallelism, and how people behave in high-choice media environments, and placed it on how social networks use algorithms to filter information. In contrast to the previous subsections, there will be more emphasis on recent research based on studies of the USA. There are two reasons for this. First, the majority studies on this new and important topic were carried out there, and second, most social networks function in a broadly similar way across different countries. This slightly reduces the expectation that findings will vary nationally. However, we should not rule out national variation altogether, particularly as media systems have been shown to differ considerably in other respects (see Section 2.2).

### Findings

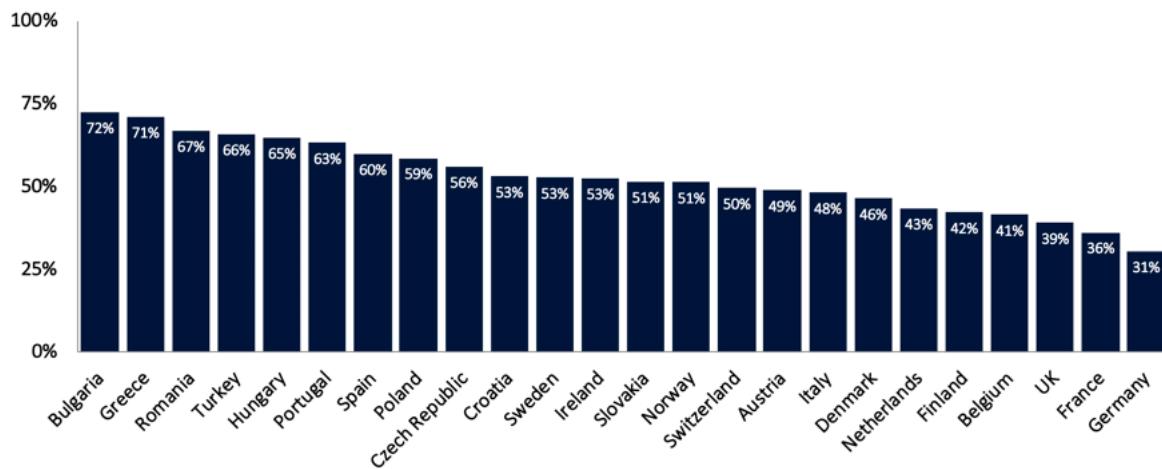
- Social media is now a widely-used source of news for many people in Europe.
- The literature in this area finds little (if any) support for news echo chambers and filter bubbles on social media, and some studies find that people are more exposed to cross-cutting news from the opposite side of the political spectrum.
- Some prominent US studies have shown that increases in cross-cutting exposure on social media might lead to an increase in polarisation. Yet, other studies using different approaches find evidence of a depolarising effect, so the picture is far from clear – particularly in Europe.
- We know little about the impact on polarisation of other algorithmically-driven news services, like search engines and news aggregators.

#### 3.2.1. Social media news use

In thinking about the effect of social media news use on polarisation, it is useful to first consider the number of people that use social media to access news. This provides an indication of how many people are likely to be directly affected when we think about findings later on. The most recent data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2018) shows that between around 30 % and 70 % of the online population within each country consumed news via social media in the last week (see figure 2). The figures are highest in eastern European and Mediterranean countries like Bulgaria (72 %), Greece (71 %), and Romania (67 %), and lowest in western European countries like Germany (31 %), France (36 %) and the UK (39%).<sup>2</sup> The report also describes how social media news use has been falling in many countries in recent years, as concern over veracity has grown, messaging apps have become more popular, and prominent social networks like Facebook have decided to de-prioritise news in favour of other content.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to emphasise that these figures refer to the online population. Though the proportion that use social media for news is higher in Southern and Eastern Europe, it is also true that internet penetration is lower. This means that the gaps between these regions and the rest of Europe are likely to be smaller than those implied by the figures.

Figure 2 – Proportion of the online population that used social media for news in the last week



Source: Newman et al., 2018

### 3.2.2. Social media and news selection

Social media has received much attention from scholars because of the way some networks use algorithms to select information to show to users. All the news that people see, whether it comes from television, newspapers, the web, or social media, has been selected in some way. Primary gatekeepers like the editors and journalists that work for news organisations are almost always responsible for an initial round of selection as they package the countless pieces of information about the world into what we commonly understand as 'the news'. But when people consume news via social media, the news they see has been through a further round of selection by the social network itself, here acting as a kind of secondary gatekeeper (Singer, 2014). Unlike the selection performed by primary gatekeepers, secondary gatekeepers – which as a category might also include search engines and news aggregators – are often able to draw on data about their users to personalise the news they are shown, so that it is more closely aligned with their inferred preferences. Some fear that algorithms will become so responsive to user preferences that they could create 'echo chambers' (Sunstein, 2017), where people are overexposed to like-minded perspectives, and 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2011), where pre-existing views are reinforced because opposing perspectives are filtered out. Pervasive echo chambers and/or filter bubbles could clearly have the potential to increase polarisation.

Algorithmic selection enables social networks to provide personalised news feeds to millions of users in real time. But when thinking about personalisation, it is useful to make a distinction between 'self-selected personalisation' and 'pre-selected personalisation' (Zuiderveld Borgesius et al., 2016). Self-selected personalisation refers to situations where people actively chose what news they see, whereas pre-selected personalisation refers to situations where algorithms choose for them. This distinction is useful because it highlights the fact that users often engage in selective exposure (see Section 3.1) that effectively results in personalisation independent of algorithms. On Facebook, for example, people can choose to 'like' the page of a news organisation, meaning that content from that outlet will start appearing in their news feed. Or, they might be shown the same content because an algorithm has determined that it aligns well with what they have looked at in the past. In practice, social networks fuse self-selection and pre-selection in such a way that it is often difficult to separate the two, but the point is that most people are constantly making selection decisions (online, offline, or on social media) that result in personalisation, so we should not compare the effects of social media to a hypothetical world where no personalisation exists.

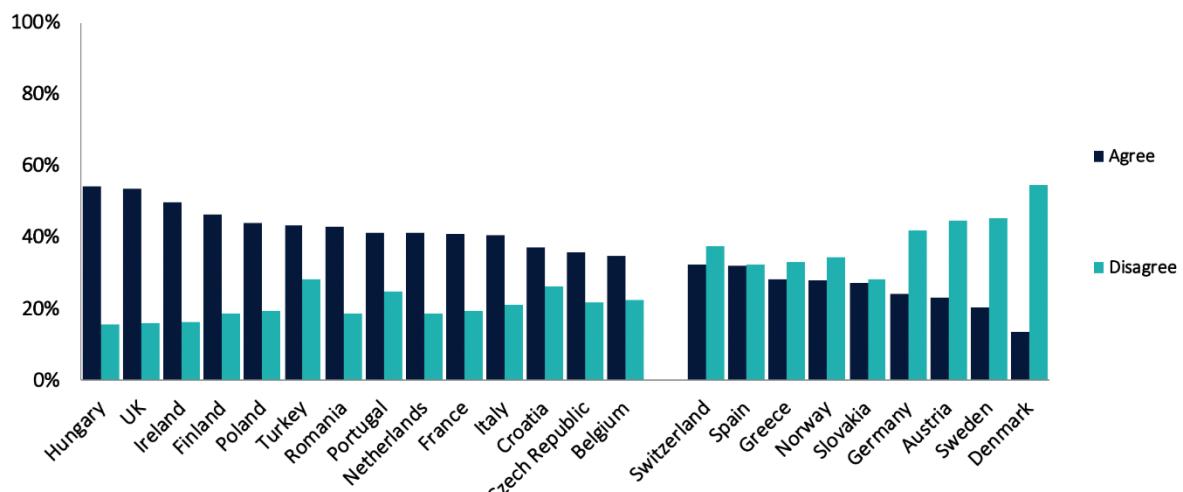
### 3.2.3. Algorithmic pre-selection and incidental exposure

There is some evidence to suggest that the algorithmic pre-selection performed by many social networks actually works against people's desire for selective exposure, potentially expanding the range of news that people are exposed to. Digital News Report data from 2017 shows that, when asked, social media users in many European countries agree that they often see news from outlets they would not normally use when on social media (Newman et al., 2017). We see similar results for a slightly different question that asks people whether they are often exposed to news stories on topics they are not interested in. Interestingly, people who live in countries that are typically thought to have more polarised news media systems – such as those in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe – are more likely to agree with these statements, perhaps because there is simply more news they do not like for them to be potentially exposed to (see figure 3). People in countries with less polarised media systems, such as the Nordic states, tend to disagree perhaps because there are fewer sources they would not consciously exclude from their news diets.

Scholars sometimes refer to this phenomenon as 'incidental exposure'. Here, it describes situations where people are shown news content while they were intending to do something else. Incidental exposure is not new. Think, for example, of television viewing in the twentieth century, where people were incidentally exposed to news if they were in the habit of leaving the television switched on all day, or if they caught part of a news bulletin after their favourite primetime entertainment show had finished.

Social media clearly has the potential for incidental exposure, but few academic studies have put this to the test. Using Digital News Report data from 2015 in four countries (USA, UK, Australia and Italy), Fletcher and Nielsen (2018a) showed that people who mostly use social media for reasons other than news nonetheless end up exposed to more sources of news than similar people who do not use social media at all. Furthermore, the news 'boost' from social media was stronger for young people and those with low interest in news – two groups that typically exhibit low levels of news use. The findings were consistent across all four countries.

Figure 3 – Proportion of social media users that say they often see news on social media from outlets they would not normally use



Source Newman et al., 2017

Of course, we might still wonder what kind of additional news sources people are incidentally exposed to. Are they typically aligned with the user's beliefs and interests, or are they 'cross-cutting', meaning that they represent opposing or countervailing views? Different approaches have yielded different answers to this question. Messing and Westwood (2014) used an experimental design to show that social endorsements on social media help people to decide what news to consume,

diluting people's inclination to self-select news that aligns with their political beliefs. This, the authors believed, could reduce polarisation if people inhabit networks made of weak ties between heterogeneous individuals. Similarly, Barberá et al. (2015) used data from Twitter to show that conversations about the news are often cross-cutting, meaning that levels of ideological segregation are low. However, they also found that conversations about political issues could mutate into polarised exchanges over time.

In a large study of Facebook data that is one of the few studies to not find evidence of cross-cutting news exposure on social media, Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015) found that self-selection was leading people to see less news from the opposite side of the political spectrum, but also that algorithmic pre-selection had a similar but smaller effect. As such, the result of the combination of self-selection, network homophily (friend selection) and algorithmic pre-selection was that people on Facebook see less news with cross-cutting views than they would if they were friends with a random selection of people. However, we might question whether a random selection of friends is a realistic or appropriate baseline for assessing the impact of social media in a world where no-one chooses their friends at random.

### 3.2.4. Social media and polarisation

On balance, it is not completely clear what the findings on algorithmic pre-selection and incidental exposure imply for polarisation. Increased cross-cutting exposure is often assumed to be a good thing. But even if we accept that social media does on the whole expose people to more cross-cutting news, it could be that this increases polarisation as people become emboldened by their dislike of the opposing view, or it could be that people moderate their beliefs as they begin to see some merit in other people's arguments (or, of course, no change could occur).

Despite this ambiguity, research that has focused specifically on polarisation is somewhat rarer, and thus far the findings are mixed. Using an online survey conducted in 2012 in the USA, Heatherly, Lu, and Lee (2017) observed that people who spend more time using social media are more likely to take part in cross-cutting political discussions. However, the likelihood of being part of a cross-cutting discussion is negatively moderated by an individual's affective polarisation (the difference in how favourably they rate Democrats and Republicans), and particularly so for Democrats. In other words, social media users are more likely to be exposed to opposing views, but the effect is smaller for more polarised individuals.

A more pressing question is whether cross-cutting exposure on social media is more likely to lead to polarisation or depolarisation. Beam, Hutchens, and Hmielowski (2018) addressed this issue by conducting a three-wave online panel survey during the 2016 US Presidential Election. Their data, which was collected by YouGov, showed that over time Facebook news use resulted in slightly lower affective polarisation, and furthermore, that the decrease was partially due to increased exposure to cross-cutting news. At the same time, increased exposure to pro-attitudinal information was not associated with increased polarisation. On balance, this suggests that Facebook use might have a depolarising effect. However, the fact that the data was collected during a US election campaign partly prevents us from assuming these findings apply more broadly.

Studies based on survey data are very valuable, especially when dealing with a topic like polarisation where measuring attitudes is required. But there are well-known limitations associated with using self-reported measures of media exposure (e.g. Prior, 2009). There are, however, a handful of studies that instead use tracking data to measure news use. Flaxman, Goel, and Rao (2016) analysed web tracking data from around 50 000 users of the Bing toolbar in the USA, and in line with other studies, found that those that use social media are more likely to be exposed to cross-cutting news. They arrived at this conclusion by first using an 'audience-based' approach (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011) to determine the ideological slant of 100 online news publishers, by combining geo-location and county voting records to estimate the size of each outlet's conservative readership. This allowed

them to estimate each user's political leaning by taking the average ideological slant of all the outlets they had visited, and also to see how much news they looked at from the opposite side. Somewhat counterintuitively, the researchers also found that random pairs of social media news users had higher average levels of ideological dispersion than people who accessed news directly. This implies that people who use social media have more polarised news consumption habits.

In one of the few studies to look at polarisation associated with a European issue, Del Vicario et al. (2017) used data from the public Facebook pages of UK news sources to map the Brexit discussion (the 2016 British referendum on whether to leave the European Union). Considering the 38 pages that featured a Brexit-related post, the authors looked at patterns of commenting and liking among users. They found that users spontaneously formed two separate communities, in that there was little overlap between the two in terms of user activity. Then, the authors identified 102 news topics mentioned by both communities, and used sentiment analysis to measure how positively or negatively each was discussed. They found that some topics were quite polarising, in that the sentiment expressed in posts by the pages from each community differed quite sharply. Some of the most polarising topics included 'David Davis', 'mass media' and 'Alec Salmond'. However, others like 'debate' and 'city' are difficult to interpret. Furthermore, it is not clear at what point differences in sentiment between communities move from healthy disagreement into polarisation. The authors also measured the difference in sentiment between posts and user comments, finding that for most topics user sentiment is more negative. But it is difficult to know whether this has any direct implications for polarisation.

In one of the largest field experiments of its kind to date, a team of researchers in the USA have recently found evidence to support the idea that exposure to cross-cutting information on social media contributes to the polarisation of attitudes over time (Bail et al., 2018). The researchers paid a sample of Twitter users to follow specially designed bots that retweeted cross-cutting statements from established media and political accounts. Then, users were periodically surveyed to measure the effect of the bot on their political attitudes (measured with a series of 10 attitude questions). In short, the study found that Democrats exposed to cross-cutting views developed slightly more liberal attitudes over time, but not to a statistically significant degree. Republicans, however, did become significantly more conservative, and furthermore, the effect increased as people paid more attention to the bot. These findings probably constitute the strongest evidence yet that exposure to cross-cutting views on social media results in increased polarisation, but in addition to the fact that this study was conducted during a US presidential campaign, there are also concerns over extrapolating findings from the relatively small and unrepresentative proportion of people that use Twitter.

### 3.2.5. Other algorithmically-driven services

Although social media is not the only service that selects news algorithmically, and therefore not the only one that may affect polarisation in some way, it is the most widely used (Newman et al., 2018) and the most widely studied. Analysis of the impact of search engines, news aggregators, and others on polarisation is rare. A number of studies have attempted to measure differences in exposure to outlets for different types of people. In recent research into Google News, Nechushtai and Lewis (2018) found little evidence of personalisation during the 2016 presidential campaign, as searches using the same terms returned similar results for both Republicans and Democrats. Similar to their study of incidental exposure on social media, Fletcher and Nielsen (2018b) analysed online survey data from the 2017 Digital News Report to show that people in the UK, USA, Spain, and Germany who use search engines to search for news topics use a broader range of news sources than people who do not. Furthermore, search engine users are also more likely to have consumed news from both a left- and a right-leaning outlet, and are more likely to have a 'balanced' news diet in terms of consuming news from a similar number of left- and right-leaning sources. This evidence

runs counter to expectations about echo chambers and filter bubbles, but as we have already seen, the possible impact on polarisation is unclear.

The Flaxman et al. (2016) study mentioned above was also able to examine the effect of search engines and news aggregators using the same approach as with social media. Here, they found that users of both search engines and news aggregators were also exposed to more cross-cutting news, but only search engine users were on average more ideologically dispersed (again, suggesting more polarised). This last point highlights that different platforms and services, though they may appear similar, can have different effects on polarisation.

### 3.2.6. Concluding remarks

The literature on the effect of social media news use on polarisation is still under-developed, especially concerning studies of Europe. Studies considering both Europe and the USA mostly fail to find any evidence of prevalent echo chambers and/or filter bubbles (at least for now). We should also remember that few people **only** use social media for news, so any evidence of echo chambers and/or filter bubbles based on single-platform studies fails to account for the fact that people are likely exposed to more diverse information from television, newspapers, and the rest of the web (Dubois & Blank, 2018). A potential increase in cross-cutting exposure also forces us to be more open-minded about possible effects on polarisation, as it could plausibly result in increased polarisation, depolarisation, or homeostasis. At the moment, some studies have found evidence of a depolarising effect, but the best available evidence perhaps points towards an increase in polarisation as a result of cross-cutting exposure.

## 3.3. Populist news consumption

This subsection reviews the literature that connects populism, the news media, and polarisation. The growth in popularity of populist parties in many European countries has created an interest in how the news media might be fostering populist attitudes. This is an emerging area of study, so there are only a handful of studies at present. However, early studies in Europe have focused on what populists think of the news media, how their attitudes shape the sources they use, and how exposure to populist views in the news media can shape attitudes.

### Findings

- People with populist attitudes have a lower opinion of the news media.
- Differences in news use between populists and non-populists tend to be smaller than those between left- and right-leaning people. However, in Spain and Italy differences along populist lines are significant.
- There is some early evidence that increased exposure to populist news outlets strengthens populist views among those who already have strong views, potentially leading to polarisation at the edges.

### 3.3.1. Populist news and selective exposure

One of the main issues with many studies of polarisation in recent years is that they have tended to conceptualise polarisation in terms of left vs right (or Republican vs Democrat in the USA). However, people can be polarised along other political dimensions (or, for that matter, along dimensions that have little to do with politics). Populism is one such dimension, and is increasingly attracting attention from scholars due to the recent success of some populist parties in Europe, and early

evidence that certain types of news coverage might be influencing voting behaviour (e.g. Doroshenko, 2018; Sheets, Bos, & Boomgaarden, 2016; Thesen, 2018).<sup>3</sup>

Populist attitudes are also associated with different opinions of the news media. A survey by the Pew Research Centre (2018) of people in eight European countries (Germany, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, France, UK, Italy, and the Netherlands) showed that people with strong populist attitudes tend to trust the news media less. A recent survey of people in four large European cities and the surrounding areas (London, Berlin, Paris, and Zurich) yielded a similar result (Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018). Left-right divides are also evident in some cases, but 'in Spain, Germany and Sweden [...] the magnitude of difference pales in comparison to the divides between those with and without populist leanings' (p. 6). Those with populist attitudes are also more likely to think the news media does a poor job of covering immigration, crime, and the economy. In Spain, for example, the proportion of people with populist attitudes who rated coverage of the economy as 'good' was 33 percentage points lower than the rest of the population. A similar gap was evident in Germany when it comes to coverage of immigration and crime.

Although attitudes towards the media appear to be influenced by populist views, the effect on news consumption is less pronounced. The same Pew study found that many people pick the same outlet as their main source of news – normally the public broadcaster. In the UK, for example, 48 % of people say that the BBC is their main source of news. In Sweden, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands, the public broadcaster is also the main source of news for over 30 % of the population. In Italy, France, and Spain, the picture is more fragmented, with no single source emerging as most people's main choice. In these countries, particularly Italy and Spain, there are also some differences along populist lines. In Italy, for example, 24 % of those with populist attitudes turn to Mediaset as their main source of news, compared to 11 % of non-populists. However, these differences are smaller than those visible when the population is divided into left and right. Nonetheless, as has already been discussed, differences in news media use along political or ideological lines constitutes news audience polarisation, which could translate over time into a further polarisation of attitudes.

Schulz (2018) surveyed people in 11 countries (10 in Europe plus the USA) and found that, in most of these, those with stronger populist attitudes tend to consume more news. However, these same individuals tend to consume more news from commercial television and tabloid newspapers (see also Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017b) – the latter having been shown to be more likely to contain populist views (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017a). At the same time, those with weaker populist attitudes tend to consume less news from these sources. If we accept that different sources expose people to different news, then we could see this as evidence of news audience polarisation. However, studies which focus on the use of specific outlets would be more illuminating in this regard.

### 3.3.2. Populist news and attitude polarisation

Studies that have looked specifically at the influence of populist news coverage on polarisation of attitudes are rare at the moment. Müller et al. (2017) studied the effect of populist media messages on populist attitudes in four European regions (London, Paris, Berlin, and Zurich). The researchers did this by combining content analysis of print publications with a two-wave online panel survey. First they surveyed a representative sample of people in each region to obtain a baseline measure of populist attitudes. Then they examined the coverage of migration and labour market policy in two quality newspapers, two tabloid newspapers, two weekly magazines, and a range of regional newspapers in each country, for uncontradicted expressions of anti-elitism, people centrism, and sovereignty over a 30-day period. Then, using a second survey, the team were able to estimate to how much populist coverage each respondent was exposed, and the effect this had on their

<sup>3</sup> See Section 2.1.2 for information about how scholars define populist communication.

attitudes. Increased exposure to populist coverage did not appear to increase populist attitudes across the board. However, in three of the four regions (London being the exception), increased exposure did appear to increase populist attitudes in those who already had relatively strong populist views, and decrease them in those with relatively weak populist views. This is reminiscent of experimental studies from the USA that found a similar effect of exposure to partisan media (Levendusky, 2013), and as the authors suggest, may contribute to polarisation because 'the more messages with a populist stance are unopposedly spread by the media, the more likely it seems that opinion camps on both ends of the populist attitude scale become more extreme' (p. 986). However, as the authors themselves acknowledged, the scope of this important finding is limited by the focus on print news consumption and the use of recall measures of news exposure.

### 3.3.3. Concluding remarks

In many ways, the emerging work on the effect of populist news exposure on populist attitudes mirrors what we have seen from earlier studies on left-right selective exposure (see Section 3.1). Populist views have a weaker influence on selective exposure. But when it does occur, exposure appears to have only a small effect on the population at large, but can strengthen the views of those who already have the strongest attitudes, leading to polarisation at the edges. Work focused on news exposure on social media is yet to consider populism, so at the moment it is difficult to say what the effect of cross-cutting exposure might be. A useful next step for research in this area might be to consider testing the effect of populist news exposure under experimental conditions, and also to investigate whether the effects vary across different parts of Europe.

## 4. Conclusion

A survey of the recent literature has revealed that across Europe there is as yet little evidence to support the idea that increased exposure to news featuring like-minded or opposing views leads to the widespread polarisation of attitudes. However, given that only a handful of studies have directly addressed this issue, there are large gaps in our knowledge concerning the influence of the news media on polarisation in Europe.

### 4.1. Future research

It is clear that more independent empirical research into the news media and polarisation is the best way to address the current gaps in our knowledge. Ideally, research designs should acknowledge that both news production and news consumption take place in a hybrid media environment (Chadwick, 2013) that incorporates print, television, radio, the web, social media, a range of different actors from inside and outside of the journalistic profession.

To better understand polarisation and the news media, researchers will need to pay more attention to changes on the supply side. There is a clear need for timely, evidence-based research examining polarisation in news production and, as an extension, news content. Studies should consider practices and output from a range of news organisations, both public service and commercial, including national and local newspapers and magazines, national and local broadcasters, and digital-born outlets. Perhaps most importantly, it will be crucial to better understand the role of newer, more partisan online news sources, particularly if their reach grows over the coming years. Analyses could address news-gathering techniques, such as interviewing, sourcing, topic selection, and ethics. In terms of content, more emphasis is needed on sourcing, tone, framing, news values, images, and balance/objectivity, not only on political and public affairs coverage but also 'softer' news topics.

Scholarship should continue to offer insights into the relationship between changes to the culture, structure, and workflow of newsrooms resulting from the move to a digital-, mobile-, and platform-focused media environment. This work should address both longstanding legacy and newer digital-born outlets and consider the role of editorial practices and routines as well as commercial strategies. Media production could be examined in terms of content as well as through studies focused on news ethics, transparency, credibility, trust-building, and impact and how these topics intersect with polarisation.

Research should continue to examine the possible influence of liberal media practices and tenets (those evident in the USA and UK) elsewhere in Europe. It could assess this phenomenon in terms of content as well as journalists' assessments of liberal influence on their news gathering, reporting, and presentation strategies. Studies are also needed to address the impact of US-based media outlets expanding into Europe, particularly digital-born players (Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, Vice, and more partisan outlets such as Breitbart).

Building on the previous recommendation, studies are needed to examine the broader structural shifts in the news ecosystem and how newsrooms are responding, including the rise of platform influence in news work, how they affect news production, content, and consumption. There is also the function of algorithms in editorial decision-making and journalists' understandings of audience, the relationship between ownership consolidation in media and the potential homogenisation and delocalisation of content, and the impact of emerging commercial practices on content and audience consumption, particularly paywalls and digital subscriptions. These trends are important to understand in the context of both national and local media using comparative and longitudinal research design. Understanding these shifts can shed light on factors that may contribute to or shape assumptions regarding media polarisation.

Furthermore, the relationship between news organisations and populism remains largely unclear. Studies so far have used content analysis to examine how populist sentiments are incorporated in news coverage. This work should continue, with a particular focus on digital-born outlets and news distributed via social media. It should also be supplemented with ethnographic research into how journalists approach their coverage, their attitudes toward populism and topic and source selection, and their views of the editorial and ethical challenges of covering populism.

In terms of news consumption, research should continue to probe the role of selective exposure in high-choice environments, while acknowledging that news consumption is increasingly shaped by algorithmic selection. Here, recognising that many people's news consumption does not take place on a single platform is particularly important, and studies that fail to take a broad view of media use will always paint a limited and potentially misleading picture. Even if it was true that many people are trapped inside echo chambers and filter bubbles on social media, this is largely irrelevant if they are consuming a broad range of news on television, in print, or across the rest of the web.

We should not lose sight of the fact that polarisation is based on differences in attitudes. To understand how attitudes are formed, researchers should conduct more experiments to explore the potential short-term impact of news media exposure, and draw on longitudinal survey data to uncover the effects over time. These insights can then be married with research into news exposure to understand the impact on the mass public.

At the same time, researchers will need to be mindful of the fact that the frameworks used to understand political attitudes are not fixed. Differences between left-leaning and right-leaning groups will continue to be important, but it looks increasingly likely that populist attitudes will also form the basis of important divides in society. At the moment, researchers are mapping the various dimensions of populist attitudes, and studies that connect news consumption to polarisation will need to draw on this work in order to be able to spot these divides.

All future research must take a broad view of Europe. As is often the case, most of what we know about the news media and polarisation in Europe is based on studies of affluent countries in the northern and the western regions (as well as the USA). When it comes to social issues, it can appear trite to point out that things are often different in different countries. But following important research in the comparative tradition (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and its emphasis on exploring the historical, political and economic factors that characterise different media systems, it has become near impossible to assume that findings from one country can be unproblematically applied to another. With respect to polarisation, this appears particularly true of the USA, where news content, audience behaviour, and attitudes appear to be polarised to such a high degree that it could be considered an outlier. It would probably be a mistake to assume that what we observe in the USA is happening across Europe.

More broadly, research in this specific area could probably be improved through greater reflection on the concept of polarisation. Polarisation as a concept feels most appropriate where it is applied to a situation where people can be divided into two poles that respond in a symmetrical fashion. Some of the research described in this report finds evidence of asymmetrical polarisation in that groups respond differently to news (e.g. Bail et al., 2018), and many scholars increasingly feel that further dimensions in addition to left-right are needed to properly understand how people's attitudes diverge (Kriesi et al., 2006). Researchers working in this area might also reflect on whether, to put it in crude terms, polarisation is always a bad thing for society. Extreme polarisation would surely be paralysing, but a certain degree of polarisation is bound to accompany diversity, and acknowledging legitimate disagreement can help us arrive at better decisions as societies. A more salient question might simply be, how much polarisation is too much?

## 4.2. Policy options

Research in this area has clear academic value, but also potential policy implications. However, given the current lack of evidence and the failure to find strong links between the news media and polarisation, drastic policy intervention could do more harm than good. Nonetheless, working from the assumption that an increase in polarisation would be a bad thing, it is possible to arrive at the following four policy options based on the evidence described throughout the report.

The first policy option is for the European Union (EU) to embark upon initiatives to **foster higher levels of interest in the news**.

The research described here shows that in Europe, in addition to gaps between those with left-leaning and right-leaning views, there also exists a gap between those with high levels of interest in the news and those with lower levels. In high choice media environments, people have the choice of opting out of news altogether if they are not sufficiently interested in consuming it – something that becomes more likely when the media environment contains lots of entertainment options. However, various political theorists have argued that well-functioning democracies require a population that understands how society functions, who governs it, and what political alternatives exist (Dahlgren, 2009; Havermas, 1989).

Researchers have long understood that interest is an important driver of news consumption, but they have only just begun to examine how interest is formed. Recent research from Sweden has shown that political interest – which goes hand-in-hand with news use – is formed at an early age, and is shaped by the interests and behaviour of friends and family (Shehata & Amnå, 2017). But there is also likely to be a role for education and news literacy. News literacy can focus on many different things, and has historically aimed to encourage people to be sceptical about the messages they receive from the media. In an era of low trust in the news, this may no longer be the best approach. News literacy initiatives could instead focus on increasing people's knowledge of how the news is made, including knowledge of how it is funded, how news is selected, and who is responsible for what during the news production process. There are early indications that people who know more about how the news is made consume more news overall, are less reliant on partisan sources, navigate news on social media differently, and are more sceptical of news from certain sources (Newman et al., 2018).

Running parallel to the first, the second policy option is for the EU to **improve the opportunity structures for news consumption**.

Efforts to increase people's level of interest in the news can only ever go so far. The structure of the media environment will also shape the choices that people make. Simply put, some media environments make it easy for people to access news, and some make it harder. In other words, they have different opportunity structures. One way of understanding opportunity structures is through television scheduling. Researchers have pointed out that some countries have encouraged (or required) news programmes to be scheduled at prime time, or next to popular entertainment programmes (Esser et al., 2012). This left people more likely to watch news bulletins, because news consumption was not entirely dependent on them being motivated enough to seek it out.

Television is still a hugely important source of news, and there may still be a role for the EU in encouraging broadcasters to schedule news programming in ways that will maximise viewing. It is less clear how this could work online. However, we should remember that algorithmically-driven services like search engines and social media can be powerful engines of incidental exposure to news. On social networks in particular, people are exposed to news even as they are intending to do other things. Furthermore, research has shown that this benefits those least interested in news the most (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018a). Although straightforwardly requiring social networks and search engines to incidentally expose people to news may be unworkable in practice, there may be other

steps that will help. In some countries, for example, public broadcasters have been put under pressure to stay off social media. This pressure often comes from commercial news publishers who would simply prefer it if they had fewer competitors. But this likely has negative consequences for the public, so the EU could protect public broadcasters' right to choose whether they are present on search and social platforms. This would form part of a broader recognition that platforms are important parts of our communications infrastructure.

This leads on to the third policy option, namely **assisting public broadcasters in their efforts to increase their online news reach**.

The healthiest news environments are those that contain strong commercial and strong public news providers (Aalberg & Curran, 2012). Commercial news providers are hugely important in this general sense, but when it comes to polarisation, it is clear that public broadcasters can play a special role. In a country like the UK, where there are high levels of press partisanship, the BBC is particularly important because it attracts huge news audiences and its charter requires it to cover topics in an impartial way. It thus acts as a bridge between two groups that may otherwise struggle to find any common ground. Research has also shown that across Europe the public broadcaster reduces the gaps in news consumption created by different levels of interest in politics (Castro-Herrero et al., 2018).

Public broadcasters are often the most widely-used sources of offline news. However, in some cases even the most well-funded organisations have struggled to build an online news audience. As more and more news consumption moves online this may have consequences for polarisation if the most widely-used news sources are those which do not have a commitment to impartiality, balance, and fairness. Furthermore, as more news publishers adopt pay models in order to fund themselves, this might create divides between groups based on their willingness to pay for news online. Public broadcasters could help by providing people with high quality online news that is free at the point of consumption. Here, the EU could play a role in assisting public broadcasters' efforts to reach online audiences, either through funding, knowledge exchange, or dialogue with platform companies.

Finally, the EU could develop structures that **enable additional collaboration between researchers, news organisations, platforms, and policymakers**.

The EU already does much to connect different stakeholders and to integrate them into the policy process, but there may be a number of additional things that the EU could do in order to improve collaboration with respect to polarisation. Some of these concern collaboration between actors within the same group. For example, the EU could establish forums and workshops for news organisations from across the media spectrum to exchange their best practices regarding digital innovation, the responsible use of algorithms, and sustainable business practices. These may not directly impact polarisation, but they may help news organisations deal with some of the pressures that are indirectly linked to the production of polarising news coverage. Other initiatives could make it easier for different types of stakeholder to collaborate with one another. If efforts around news literacy are going to be successful, for example, news organisations and platform companies will have to be more transparent with others about their practices so that this knowledge can be shared. The EU could provide a space for this that offers some protection for those involved, given that this knowledge often has commercial value.

Any attempts to encourage collaboration between different stakeholders must include platform companies like Facebook and Google. Relations between news organisations and platform companies are often fraught (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018), so the EU could potentially play a useful mediating role, helping them work together to create healthier public spaces. Platforms have historically been reluctant to take editorial decisions, so asking them to do so with respect to polarising news coverage is probably unrealistic. Yet, there are indications that platform companies

might be willing to take steps to control the dissemination of certain types of news coverage. Polarising news coverage is not the same as false news, so expecting platforms to simply remove it may create problems. However, given that Facebook, for example, has stated that they would like time on Facebook to be 'time well spent', they may be responsive to calls for them to deprioritise polarising content in their news feed (Facebook has already stated that it will deprioritise news content from sources that its community deems untrustworthy). It may also be possible for platforms to flag potentially polarising content, in the same way that some of them currently flag stories that contain disputed claims. Much of this will rely on the automatic identification of polarising content at scale, which would of course be very challenging from a technical point of view. In the meantime, the EU could work with platforms and other stakeholders to develop a voluntary code of conduct for dealing with news content on social media.

### 4.3. Concluding remarks

Outlining clear and workable policy options is always difficult, but is made even harder when we lack an evidence base built through years of empirical research. Improving our knowledge of the links between news use and polarisation will not be easy either, and could get harder over time. Experiments and surveys have much discussed limitations. Performing good content analysis across different platforms is challenging. And carrying out comparative research across different countries can be time-consuming and expensive. On top of this, news use is increasingly intermediated by social media, search engines, and other platforms, all of whom can be reluctant to share their data on user behaviour. There may be more data than ever before on people's news use, but most researchers cannot access it. At the same time, the financial challenges faced by much of the news business, the decisions made by technology platforms, broader social and political trends, and a host of other forces all combine in such a way that news audience behaviour is changing dramatically year on year (Newman et al., 2018).

Such a dynamic situation will undoubtedly generate speculation about the consequences for polarisation. The rise of social media was accompanied by a lot of plausible ideas about how this would inevitably trap people in echo chambers and filter bubbles, with dire consequences for democracy. A review of the literature shows that most studies do not find strong support for this, but it was only through careful, independent research that it became possible to see that the fears were largely unwarranted, at least for now. Some people assume that polarisation among the mass public is inevitable in a high choice media environment that includes partisan news sources. Researchers will need to continue to put this idea to the test.

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This report describes a review of the literature examining the effect of news use on polarisation across Europe. In considering work concerned with both the supply side of news (news production) and the demand side (news consumption), the report concludes that across Europe there is as yet little evidence to support the idea that increased exposure to news featuring like-minded or opposing views leads to the widespread polarisation of attitudes. However, given that only a handful of studies have addressed this issue directly, there are large gaps in our knowledge concerning the situation in different European countries.

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